망나니
왕자가
LEGEND OF SWORD'S SONG
글럼프
퓨전 판타지
장편소설
되었다
GOLEM
FACTORY

I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE

-Legend of Sword's Song-

– 망나니 1왕자가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 5 -

-AUTHOR-

Glump

[Active Translations]

CHAPTER 200
CONNECTING BLOOD (1)

‘I still remember the moment I first met you on an unnamed field as if it was yesterday. You were like a lost lamb, like a child, so very wet, with no shelter from the rain. It seemed to me at the time as if I was seeing my past self. You probably don’t how pained my heart felt.

Therefore, I pledged that I would be the sturdy roof under which you can avoid the storm. Because I thought that it was what I should do for my brother… ’

The first half of the letter was filled with many useless platitudes and expressions of love that were entirely on another level.

“Can he really be this crazy?”

I laughed and quickly read through the rest of the letter.

‘The current situation in which my spears and swords face against you, you who are like my brother, is a tragedy in itself… ’

The middle section was a rambling story soaked in tragedy and sorrow. I glanced over it.

‘I was forced to take the position for the good of my land, but I held no intention of taking my brother’s fortresses and territory, from the very beginning. Now the time has come, and I want to return the fortresses I had looked after for a while to their original owners… ’

I had begun to wonder if the entire letter was just insane bullshit, but there was a point to it.

‘I am about to end this tragic war. Everything will go back to how it was before. In the time when you and I had undergone the bond of brotherhood… ’

The letter was a one-sided declaration that the war was at an end.

“Haha.”

Bitter laughter came from me as I considered the degree of shamelessness expressed in the letter.

It was the Empire that started this war. It was the Empire that invaded the lands of Leonberg. The kingdom has already lost its mother, its queen, and many others. But now, the third princeps had decided to return everything to as it was before the war.

I read the last part of the letter again.

‘Don’t forget that just as you and I are brothers, so too the Empire and the kingdom are like brothers. Brothers do not stab each other in the back.’

He wrote that, as we were brothers, we should not attack if the other’s back was turned. The princeps would return the occupied fortresses to cement the peace. He was in a situation where he was at war with his own flesh and blood brother, so all this talk about brotherhood was very uncomfortable. However, despite the naive words of the princeps that things would become as they were before, his proposal itself was not bad.

The kingdom was already at its limit. It wasn’t about defeat or victory, but rather the post-war reality. The kingdom was currently operating as many troops as it could mobilize and was pouring all of its resources into the war. It was no exaggeration to say that Leonberg had bet everything to survive and win this war.

It was natural that the longer the war went on, the greater the burden the kingdom would have to bear. And it was in this situation that the third princeps proposed an end to the war, even giving away the fortresses he had occupied. It was indeed a difficult offer to reject.

Nevertheless, I was not happy with it. It felt as if the offer had been covered with dirt.

I turned my head and saw the imperial knight who stood under the wall. Even while Leonberg’s knights surrounded him, he showed no signs of fear. He was firmly convinced that no one in this citadel would dare so much as touch a tip of his hair, notwithstanding the death of countless imperial knights and soldiers in this stronghold not long ago.

The knight was arrogant, like a royal messenger who came to offer his lessers a great

reward. He was inundated by a sense of superiority, like a rich man borne aloft over the heads of the poor.

The moment I realized this, I recognized what emotions I was feeling.

Accepting peace like this would mean extinguishing the embers spread by the queen's death with my own hands. Countless knights and soldiers of Leonberg had devoted their lives to turning everything created by the Empire to ash. The kingdom's victories and honors would become hollow, and the imperial knights would once more consider the royal knights as beneath their notice.

As the imperials would remember, the war's end would be a consequence of their negotiations, not Leonberg's victory. The evidence of this was the knight who stood beneath me. I hadn't even said that I would accept peace, yet the knight was already trembling with arrogance as if he has offered us a generous gift. It was an unpleasant sight.

I no longer had any reason to see such an ugly thing. However, there was something that had to be done before we expelled the envoy.

"Malcoy."

"Yes, your Highness?"

Malcoy had waited close by; he now came to me.

I gave him a brief summary of the situation and instructed him to write a reply immediately.

"What should I write?"

"If you want to end the war, then take it seriously. Don't think about ending it by sending me one of these letters."

Malcoy pondered for a bit, then nodded.

"You are saying that we should negotiate the end of the war properly."

He took out a pen and parchment on the spot and wrote the reply in one go.

“Would this be enough?”

I skimmed through the letter Malcoy had written. I didn’t like the useless platitudes and polite tone, but I could not fault the content itself.

“Good. Let’s send it like this.”

I sealed the parchment roughly there and then and handed it over to Malcoy, who in turn handed it over to the knight. The imperial ambassador grew conspicuously stiff when he received it.

“Go. Your business here is done.”

I gestured with my hand, waving the envoy away.

“Then-”

The imperial knight had not shaken off his air of arrogance, but he was more silent now.

Of course, the mission he had believed would be a success has suddenly turned into something else, and the man seemed only concerned about the third princeps’ reprimands. There was no reason for me to care about the arrogant imperial knight’s situation. What I needed to care about now was the state of the Empire, and what Leonberg could gain from it.

To do that, I had to force the third princeps to the negotiating table.

Fortunately, that wouldn’t be difficult. For once, time was on the kingdom’s side because the princeps had to return to the mainland as soon as possible. If the civil war instigated by the fifth princeps succeeded while the third remained on the border, everything would be in vain.

It was enough for the third princeps if Leonberg made peace and pretended it did not want to grab him by the ankles. If the princeps wanted to, he could have hurried back to the imperial capital, ignoring the kingdom’s forces. However, he would then have to be prepared to face the stigma of forcefully pulling out his forces and letting his front lines collapse.

So this peace offer was also a result of the third princeps’ greed.

Shortly after the war broke out, the Empire continually pushed troops into battle. Most of them were smashed at the beginning. Those legions who had arrived later went through repeated battles and were either destroyed or forced to reorganize.

The grasping third princeps then absorbed not only the Empire's northeastern legions – which had become decimated – but also intact legions. It had become impossible to hold the border without the princeps' troops. The moment he pulled his troops from the front line and hurried back, he would be ripping a great gash in the imperial battle lines.

Of course, he had the option of dividing his troops and leaving for Hwangdo while keeping the border secure. However, there was no way that the greedy princeps would leave behind the same amount of troops on the border as those he would take with him to fight his brother.

If he had planned to do that from the beginning, he would never have bothered dispatching envoys and bidding for peace. If I had been in that situation, I knew the only course of action was to rush to the capital. I had no intention of letting him go back to Hwangdo, however.

I would try to hold onto his ankles for as long as possible.

"Send orders to all frontline fortress commanders. Tell them that when the command is given, they must switch to the offensive and prepare to attack behind enemy lines."

The Sky Knights busily flew all along the border, delivering my orders. The troops of the Gifted Lion Citadel were also ready to campaign. I was making sure that the Imperial Army recognized our intentions; we were very loud and violent. The effect of my ploy was swiftly revealed. When our allied forces acted as if they would throw open their gates and charge out, the third princeps sent another envoy.

"The third princeps says that anything can be done for the sake of peace between our two countries."

This time, the envoy was a proper, formal negotiator. I entrusted Malcoy and other citadel staff to start negotiating the terms for a cessation war.

"This chance will never come again. Tear as much away from them as possible."

When I expressed my opinion, there were those who expressed their concerns,

saying that it would be a loss if the negotiations broke down.

I knew they were thinking about what was best for the kingdom, but I dismissed their worries.

Of course, the negotiations could collapse due to us making truly excessive demands, but that didn't matter much. After all, we wouldn't be negotiating for eternal peace.

For how long would the promises of a princeps, not even the emperor, remain in effect after the urgent situation was over? How trustworthy would they be?

It would be promises kept only until the end of the civil war.

Despite knowing that, I felt justified in focusing on negotiations that might not prove meaningless. If one looked at it from a high place, peace on my terms was different than the initial terms offered by the imperial princeps.

As the negotiations proceeded, Leonberg was able to claim reparation funds for the war. We also acquired barren imperial territory south of Leonberg's border. These lands belonged to the old kingdom four hundred years ago, having been conquered as time passed.

Although no victory or defeat was specified in the negotiations, it was safe to assume that the Empire recognized defeat and accepted responsibility for the war.

It was unconventional. It was too unconventional even for me, who wanted to reap as many benefits as fast as possible.

"It's weird. There is no reason to give up their country's land so easily, no matter how barren the territory, or how devastated by war it is."

It was as Malcoy said. Handing land from one country to another was not a matter for a princeps to decide on. The third princeps was accepting our conditions too easily; only a madman would do it.

However, the third princeps wasn't crazy; it was just that the situation around him had changed so rapidly that he was eager to jump into action and protect his position.

"The high lords and the Imperial Spire's mages are all supporting the fifth princeps!"

I only heard the news after the initial negotiations were over.

CHAPTER 201
CONNECTING BLOOD (2)

This information was flown in after the negotiations were over. However, it came just before the heads of both delegations stamped down their respective seals. The bad luck was obviously the third princeps', not mine.

"Stop the negotiations! We must study the situation!" I exclaimed as I straightened myself at the negotiating table.

"Aren't all the matters dealt with already! There is no such law in the world!" the empire's envoys protested as they rose up.

"The Empire has already expressed as much sincerity as it can to correct relations with your country! This news comes at the last minute, it has no bearing on the case at hand!"

"Since his imperial Highness considers the kingdom like a brother, he decided to make many concessions. This is nothing more than a betrayal of his goodwill and fidelity!"

The envoys put up a strong protest as they pressured me. Of course, I did not swallow their seeds. Whether or not the Empire and Leonberg could deal on the basis of trust, it was they who felt the fire under their feet, not we.

I blatantly laughed at the imperial negotiators.

"Don't forget that the Empire is not proposing peace from fear of the kingdom," one of the imperial ambassadors threatened me as he shook in indignation.

"Okay? Then we go ahead," I stated.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"The war."

The imperial ambassadors had constantly been whining; they now shut their mouths at once.

“Do you have any wishes?” one of the representatives asked after hesitating, having observed the situation.

“You are the ones with the wishes,” came my reply, saying that it was the Empire that wanted something and the Empire that had to decide what it was willing to trade in order to get what it wanted.

“We will come back again.”

The imperial representatives nodded in agreement and stood up. They seemed to have realized that there was nothing more to gain by talking.

“If you’re coming again, fill your luggage as much as possible. There will be no time to come and go,” I told them.

“We will keep that in mind.”

The envoys left the fortress. And while they left, the Sky Knights started arriving one after another to deliver news after spying on the imperial mainland.

They said that a large number of nobles who had followed the third princeps have defected to the fifth princeps’ side. The knights told me that the Empire’s western territory had already fallen into the hands of the fifth princeps. Rumor had it that he was expanding his power base incredibly quickly, and its foundation was the might of the Imperial Spire.

The Spire wasn’t a simple social gathering place for wizards, nor was it a temporarily assembled group of magic users who acted for the sake of their realm.

One of the most ancient institutions in the world: This was the Spire. The mysteries, power, and wealth they have accumulated through the ages made them a force to be reckoned with. I now had to think differently about the imperial civil war, which I had expected to end soon.

“It is said that those of the Spire are recruiting mercenaries by expending enormous funds.”

“The number of mercenaries they have recruited so far have reached about twenty legions.”

All the information delivered by the Sky Knights pointed to a prolongation of the civil war.

“Hwaryong, Leonberg, and Dotrin. And now the Spire. Is this the most chaotic age of the Empire?”

I had predicted that confusion would soon come, but the shape it was taking was far different from what I had expected. It was extremely surprising.

But the situation wasn’t bad; the greater the confusion in the Empire, the better off was Leonberg. I was curious, though… What the hell did the fifth princeps use to bake and boil those hardass wizards?

The mages weren’t very active in secular affairs unrelated to the mysteries they pursued.

The Sky Knight spoke on about the discord between the imperial family and the Imperial Spire.

It was said that the wizards were dissatisfied with the emperor compulsively recruiting wizards to take part in the Dotrin invasions, and so they decided to curb the Burgundy family’s power. The rumors went that the fifth princeps did not control the Spire; that they had rather caused the civil war by using the princeps as a proxy. This was a far more plausible reason for the high lords and wizards to be beset by group mania and grasp for power suddenly.

I decided that the rumors could not be true in practice, however.

The fifth princeps was not as greedy as the third. He was not idiotic enough to set a precedent for the Spire to interfere in the imperial family’s affairs.

There must have been a deal done under the table. The problem was that I was not sure what that deal was at the moment.

“Continue to seek information. Deliver everything to me without fail, even if it’s just a vague rumor.”

It was a tense situation for me. We had almost concluded the negotiations. If I were wrong, if I had made a mistake, we would lose our chance. That is why I told the Sky Knights to deliver all information to me without leaving anything out.

The knight was about to leave when he looked back at me, remembering something.

“The reason for the fifth princeps to start the war is a bit odd. As a Burgundy by blood, he declared himself a rebel, saying it was to fix the Empire’s faults. In the process, he criticized the emperor, defining him as a wicked man who walks an inhumane path.”

It was an unexpected story to hear. I had thought the reason for the rebellion was that the fifth princeps did not want his trashy brother to become emperor and consume the Empire.

“Of course, he did not forget to mention the qualities of the third princeps. It is said that his tone when criticizing the emperor was much stronger, however. The gist of it was that the emperor was responsible for all the calamities taking place in the Empire.”

It wasn’t strange to hear that the rebel decried his father for his moral flaws. It was indeed a time when many tribulations were occurring in the Empire.

It is called a nosering when in the nose and an earring when hanging from an ear. There was no situation more ideal in which to bite and rip into the monarch’s virtues, or lack of them. If that was all there was to it; I would have heard his report and left it at that.

“The princeps said that the current emperor will be the death of the Empire, that his reign cannot be allowed.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“He said he wants to end the emperor’s reign?”

“Yeah. He said that as long as the emperor endured, the calamities would not end. The princeps said that it was his great duty to correct things.”

It was a strangely gritty thing to hear. The Sky Knight left after saying a few more things, his mood looking somewhat subdued. Even after he left, I could not get rid of

my worries.

I felt like I had missed something important, but I didn't know what it was, so my concern grew greater and greater. While I was in such a state, the third princeps' envoy arrived at the citadel again.

Naturally, my tone and attitude became sharp. The envoys were desperate to somehow bring the negotiations to a close, and I took note of that. I treated them with apathy throughout the day, so it was natural that the negotiating pace was sluggish.

"Your Highness, leave the negotiations to us and take a break."

My staff came and suggested it was time to stop, that things were going nowhere. I could no longer talk to these envoys, knowing that they would not negotiate properly by offering the right incentives.

These were the matters of the Empire and therefore fell under the purview of the Burgundy imperial family. I figured that it was better to talk with the persons concerned rather than with envoys alone. I wanted one with Burgundy blood to be called to the table in the near future.

"Tell the princeps: Let's meet in person."

Soon after I had spoken to the negotiators, a close friend of the princeps came as a messenger.

"The princeps accepted the offer."

It seemed that the princeps figured it was better to meet Leonberg's top decision-makers in person, and because of our previous relationship, he accepted my offer.

And so a meeting was scheduled between the heads of both sides. Its location was in the wasteland between the Gifted Lion Citadel and the 41st Imperial Legion's fortress. Legions from both sides stood facing each other across the border.

I saw the Imperial Army in the distance. The third princeps was there, surrounded by knights.

He looked to be in a poor mood, even from a distance. I was sure that he wanted to

return to the mainland as soon as possible and that he was angry that I had grabbed him by his ankles.

“Fuck them! You guys couldn’t have done things worse, and now I must be bothered! You are all useless!”

So great was the third princeps’ anger that I heard him shouting from afar. The imperial knights and nobles were trying to calm the princeps down ahead of the talks. I observed the distant scene.

The behavior of the third princeps was truly unrestrained as he kicked noble asses or spat curses. It seemed that his qualities were insufficient to manage a small family, not even speaking of an empire. If I could see this, so could others; it was far too obvious.

How could the emperor see it any differently? And why did he leave the princeps to grow into the most probable successor to the throne?

I would surely have known my son’s nature were I the emperor. The emperor must surely know that the moment the third princeps gained the throne, the Empire would collapse into rubble.

He could have pruned the shoots if he wanted; he could have secured the structure of succession by protecting a competent princeps. And yet, the emperor stood on the side of the third princeps, as if it didn’t matter who succeeded to the throne. It was hard to understand.

While that question continued to trouble my mind, the third princeps came forward with a group of knights.

“Your Highness.”

My knights, who watched him approach, asked if it was our turn to advance.

“Go.”

With Quéon and the Black Lancers in front, we headed to the empty field where the princeps was waiting.

“Because you are my brother, I made a lot of concessions. Don’t test my patience

further."

This was how the third princeps greeted me as he sat down before the negotiating table that stood on the field. Instead of answering the third princeps, I sat down and gave him a provocative look.

The princeps' face turned red as he noticed my attitude. It was regrettable that he didn't have a seizure right there and then. Rather, he started speaking in a growling voice.

"I will accept almost any terms you demand. If you ask for a citadel, I'll give it to you. If you want the land, it's yours. Just don't overdo it. I don't want to have to take back what I've given you in the future."

Our unlikely play-acting as siblings was ended immediately; the third princeps was openly hostile to me. I also had no intention of playing the game anymore.

"I will only ask once," the princeps stated. He was genuinely angry that a prince of a small country was proudly standing against him.

"Make your demands," he said. "But if you waste my time with useless things after hearing my answer, I will not tolerate it further."

I shook my head with vigor and asked the princeps, "What is the emperor thinking?"

The third princeps' eyes widened when I asked my blunt question, and he pointed at me.

"This guy! He is the Emperor of the Burgundy Empire! He's not one who wants to talk to some border prince in the barren countryside!"

"If you want to become emperor, you'd better answer my questions."

"Hah!" the third princeps exclaimed as if having a seizure of anger. I waited patiently. It was the princeps that was being chased by time, not me.

After I waited for a while, the princeps managed to calm his anger and spoke.

"I don't understand the intent of your question. You want to know his Majesty's intentions?"

“I mean, the Empire is in chaos, so why isn’t he moving?”

The third princeps laughed.

“Don’t look down upon the Empire. It is still strong. It is impossible for such a little conflict to have any influence on the long history and great power of the Empire.”

“So, I’m asking why he’s not using that great power.”

“To a prince from some small village country, the turmoil seems great. But you should know – the current uprising is nothing but a trivial thing, and it will end as if it never happened the moment his Majesty moves.”

The third princeps – like the idiot he was – didn’t understand the point of my question as he continued to laud the Empire’s greatness.

“My question seems difficult for you to grasp. So, why did the great emperor remain silent and allow things to reach this point? If he wanted to, it would’ve been an easy job to designate one of the principes as the successor to the throne.”

The princeps laughed, only now understanding my question.

“It is the decision of the emperor of the great Empire. The Empire does not allow the unqualified to rise to the throne.”

The man who said this was the epitome of being unqualified, so his statement was absurd. The third princeps named the theory of survival of the fittest, and I had no idea where he had picked that idea up.

“We of the Burgundy imperial family believe that, if you are truly outstanding, you will eventually reach the highest place, no matter how rough the storm. That belief has never betrayed those with Burgundy blood.”

The princeps seemed to be the only person who did not know that this would be the first time in history that the Empire was betrayed by that belief.

“You are a prince from a lesser country which maintains its ruling family by adhering to the principle that succession goes to the firstborn. You will not understand. The fact is that the lineage of our monarchs is determined by heaven itself.”

I was about to end the conversation with the self-indulgent princeps at this point.

I wanted to; I tried… I couldn't.

"There are many kings in this world."

My heart rang out, feeling stretched, as the third princeps spoke.

"The only true monarch is Burgundy."

Such great energy flowed along with the words of the idiot princeps who couldn't even take a proper shit, the princeps who was trembling with anxiety. My eyes widened as I looked at him.

There was nothing special to be seen on the nervous and arrogant man's face.

But I knew: It was no illusion, that vibrating energy and the pounding of my heart I had felt moments ago. It was a deep ripple of karma and spirit, scattered so far throughout the world that its origin remained unknown. Even if it existed under a veneer of insignificance, the power of the energy could have reached anywhere.

It was obviously a [Mythic] poem.

"That is the truth about the Burgundy imperial family, which has forged and supports the Millennium Empire," the third princeps chattered on with an arrogant face. He didn't even seem aware of what had happened moments ago.

CHAPTER 202
CONNECTING BLOOD (3)

It was natural that the descendants of the first emperor had not forgotten muhunshi.

No matter how much the ring was valued over the heart in the present age, the spirit and karma achieved by the Burgundy ancestors were so great that the current family could not dare throw it away in favor of the virtues of the ring.

In fact, Umbert Dortmund's descendants and the Sky Knights have preserved the original [Poetry of Sudden Change] left for them by the Sky Blade, even if the karma and spirit contained therein did not reach the level of the past. It wasn't strange that the Burgundy family remembered the traditions of their ancestors. The problem lay in the qualities of the fool before me, who talked like a madman. Traditions are not inherent; they are not passed on to those who lack the vessels to bear them.

That was exactly the case with the third princeps. He did not have the vessel to hold the tradition; all he had were his disastrous traits.

Yet the same fook had summoned part of that tradition in my very presence. And that which the princeps had used was clearly on a [Mythic] level.

I had to struggle through terrible pain that threatened to disperse my soul, forcing me to use traditions I could not easily bear to handle. That was the power I had faced.

It meant that one with Burgundy blood had given the princeps excerpts from a [Mythic] poem, just enough so that the princeps could handle them.

And that someone must've been the emperor.

I concentrated my entire mind on grasping the emperor's intentions. Whenever I thought about him, there was nothing, as if I was searching for a path in complete darkness. Fortunately, it was not so this time.

The spirit of the poem recited by the third princeps was still wandering around. I

summoned my mana and gathered energy around me. In my mind, I focused countless times on the Burgundy dance poem that the princeps had unknowingly uttered.

‘There are many kings in this world.’

‘The only true monarch is Burgundy’

The poem’s verses sang about the one and only ruler in the world, but there was no great ambition or aspiration contained therein. It was all just blind praise and worship of Burgundy. It felt as if I had suffered a blow in the back of my head because the nature of the poem was such that it did not fit in well with the prince of another country.

It would be apt to describe it as a hymn sang by the slave for its master. If I wanted to find something similar… Okay, it was exactly like the [Poetry of Subjugation] that Adelia Bavaria had dedicated to me. The verses were different, but the essences were so very alike.

It was a slave’s hymn to the master, a song that is more of an oath than a dance poem – an oath of submission. I looked at the princeps again, the arrogant and proud imperial princeps, and saw a lowly slave praising the greatness of his master.

Within him, there were two completely different identities that could only intersect from time to time. As I stared blankly at the man, a thought passed through my head.

If I was an ordinary human, I would never have imagined this.

I had to remember that I wasn’t an ordinary human. I now formed a hypothesis that was too terrible to think about: Perhaps the emperor’s successors are just vessels to hold power for him.

It was like me, the sword, who had taken over a body and pretended to be human. Goosebumps popped up all over my body. I tried to shake off the ominous feeling.

I was speculating; it was a ridiculous leap of twisted logic: I repeated these words countless times. However, constant whispers came from my insight and intuition that I had gained by being an observer over many centuries. I couldn’t build up karma to solve the puzzle, so I tried to think of a person who had climbed to the highest ground and looked down upon the world. It was no strange thing that the

temperament I sensed was so close to that of the Burgundy family's founder. The appearance of the emperor I had seen in person kept sparking through my imagination. To that image, I added the comments of the fifth princeps that had recently been reported to me: Inhumanity, infidelity.

Everything was pointing to one common truth.

"You should have answered me by now," the third princeps said, urging a conclusion to the previous negotiations, and it was then that I became convinced. I didn't know why the emperor didn't care for his flesh and blood, but it was at least clear to me that no matter who gained the throne, he had the means to hand over his family's tradition and power.

That was why he acted like that toward the third princeps, why it didn't matter to him who rose to take the throne. No matter who sat on the throne, nothing would change.

"Is it possible that you will only come to your senses after seeing me reach the end of my patience? How long do you want to stay in a place like this!"

The third princeps once more urged me to close negotiations. Instead of answering, I quietly looked at him.

'Tok~ tok~'

As I tapped the table with my fingers, and I thought about how to treat the third princeps. Should we empower him, as originally planned? Or maybe we should take his life here to keep the emperor in check. My murderous intentions escaped from my mind as I worried.

'Quaazzik~'

The flags of both countries that had been planted in the empty, windless field swelled up under the sudden burst of energy.

"He unleashed his energy! While discussing peace!"

Burgundy's knights felt the unusual wave and put their hands on their sword hilts as they cried out to me.

“You dare put your hands on your swords if the prince is before you!” Quéon and his lancers roared fiercely at the knights of the Empire.

“Didn’t your crown prince act first?”

“He just sat there quietly! Do not threaten him!”

Words came and went.

‘Sheeek!’

Knights on both sides simultaneously drew their swords or readied their lances as they pointed the weapons at each other. The peaceful conference existed no more.

‘Woow~’

Imperial paladins summoned their aura blades. The kingdom’s champions did not stand back as they instilled energy into their swords. Murder and hostility flowed from all quarters.

Tension filled the empty field.

‘Boowooo woohooo~’

‘Dumtumtum~ Dumtumtum~’

Both armies readied themselves, blowing horns and beating drums.

“What are you doing now?” the third princeps demanding after he had retreated from the table in terror.

“It’s not too late!” the imperial paladins hurriedly shouted at me. “Stay your energy and step back!”

“He’s mad. He can’t do this without being mad. He certainly wants to see his country burn to cinders. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have done that all of a sudden!” the third princeps screamed, saying that he could not ignore my sudden actions. He sounded like a weak dog barking in fear.

As I watched him, my murderous intentions escaped from me. I couldn’t sever a

sprout that might destroy the Empire just because of a simple hunch. Once everything became clear, it wouldn't be too late to kill him.

"Seal."

Adelia, who was waiting behind me, handed me the Crown Prince's seal.

'Shh~'

I picked up the treaty lying on the table – and I stamped it.

"Uh?" the third princeps stupidly gasped as if my actions were unexpected.

"What are you doing? Can't you take it?" I demanded in a deep tone of voice, and only then did the princeps stamp his seal down onto the treaty.

"It's a smart decision!" he said with a laugh, his tone sounding the same as when he had yelped in fear. "Today's decision saved your kingdom."

"I know," I said and gestured with my hand at the guy.

"Get out of here."

If I kept watching him, my thoughts might suddenly change.

"You dare?" The third princeps' face was stretched into a grimace, his body trembling.

However, he soon remembered we were at the end of negotiations, and it was he who would suffer the most damage were a battle to break out.

"Huh! You jackanapes! You will regret this later," he said and left the empty field, and Burgundy's knights followed after him. I gave them a last look, then also left. The imperial legions began to march away from the border that very day. The Royal Army and I watched the borders with care in preparation for some deception by the enemy that might be on the cards.

But there were no surprises. After a week, no imperial troops were to be found on the border.

Leonberg's Southern Army moved south, claiming the imperial fortresses and territories that were transferred to us in the treaty. And so, new borders were drawn, and we could prepare for troubles yet to come. But before such a time, we could finally rejoice in Leonberg's victory and enjoy the peace – even if it would be a short peace.

"The Eastern Fleet is returning!"

Meanwhile, news came that the king and the fleet were on their way back from the empire.

"I'm curious what his expression will be when he learns that Leonberg's territory has increased."

I chuckled as I thought about the king returning from the front lines. Still, it wasn't time to just be having fun. Even if the war was over and the kingdom was in a state of peace, I still had work to do. I hoped that the king would return as soon as possible so that I could let go of my current burdens and focus on my work.

Of course, it was unlikely that the king would agree with my plan.

* * *

'The Kingdom of Leonberg won the war!'

The news of the northern war quickly spread. People were amazed that a small, isolated country had endured the imperial onslaught. There was more surprising news, however.

"The Burgundy Empire permanently surrendered part of their territory to Leonberg. They also paid them substantial reparation funds. This is no different than the Empire acknowledging defeat."

The weaker northern nation had not only endured the war but won it so perfectly that the Empire conceded to their demands. It was at this time that many began to doubt the Empire's might after they had failed in invading two separate nations.

"There is no eternal empire in this world."

Some who were more impatient said that the Empire's fate was sealed and that a

new order had to be established on the continent. Considering that the Empire had been plunged into civil war after successive foreign defeats, their impatient words were not spoken without reason.

In fact, the imperial civil war showed many signs of developing into a prolonged conflict.

Instead of hastening to the capital, the fifth princeps, under the protection of the Spire, was gradually expanding his power in the western part of the Empire. The natural consequence of this was that the battles against those nobles who followed the emperor did not end.

The third princeps was leading his army, returning to the mainland, but since he had advanced all the way to the border, it would take some time for him to reach the power base of the fifth princeps.

In the midst of these developments, the weaker nations that had been suppressed by the Empire began to raise their heads one by one. No country openly rebelled, but it was clear that their attitude toward the Empire was not the same as before.

These were the times when the situation on the continent began to fluctuate.

“They say that Leonberg’s Crown Prince did an outstanding job.

While rapid developments took place across the continent, interest in those heroes who had triumphed against hopeless odds gradually increased.

“I heard that he is credited for leading his nation to victory in that war.”

“As I hear it, he’s the youngest paladin in their kingdom, right?”

“It looks like the blood of his ancestor, who was named the Lion of the North, still flows strong.”

People praised Prince Adrian Leonberger’s efforts and victory, calling him the Young Lion of the North.

“After I heard his story, they told me he wasn’t even married yet!”

“It’s a pity that the Crown Prince of Leonberg, who will gain the throne, has not yet

found a match."

Even those who wished to form bonds of kinship with the young northern heroes appeared.

"There is that young lion from the north…"

And some of them had already sent their swiftest hawks.

CHAPTER 203
THE EMBERS IN THE FURNACE REMAIN THE SAME (1)

While Leonberg's forces were fighting fiercely against the Imperial Army on the border, Maximilian wandered outside the palace day and night, trying to soothe the simmering public sentiment.

He traveled to large and small villages to console the families of soldiers who were on the front lines and did his best to resolve their grievances.

Because the men had left for the border, Maximilian would roll up his sleeves and help, not hesitating to get into the mud and dust.

When he wasn't working, he was always with the people and listened to their stories. He looked at the circumstances of the poorest of the poor and sometimes blushed as he failed to overcome their passions or troubles. At first, some thought Maximilian was showing off. Some criticized his hypocrisy, asking how the high-ranking royal family could understand the lives of the lowly.

Some radicals even mentioned that war broke out in the kingdom because the royal family cried out for independence.

"What is independence? If it weren't for the royal family, my son and his father would have been alive!"

As Maximilian heard someone shout at him, a stone flew in.

'Shh~.'

Carls Ulrich blocked Maximilian's front.

'Gwang!'

The stone hit the knight's iron armor with a gonging sound and rolled to the ground.

The palace knights quickly surrounded the prince while the royal cavalry and soldiers surrounded the people gathered in the lot.

“What kind of person are you?!” Carls Ulrich exclaimed in a low, frosty voice.

There came no answer. The disgraceful person who had committed the atrocity of throwing a stone at the prince had already hidden back into the crowd. Only the innocent were terrified by the sudden situation; they trembled. The palace knights glanced at the people, their gazes sharper than before.

If one of them saw anything suspicious, they would not hesitate to use their swords.

“Get back,” the prince said as he stepped forward.

“Your Highness, please stay where you are. If something unsavory happens, we’ll deal with it,” urged Carls, but Maximilian shook his head.

“Will stones thrown by these helpless people hurt me?”

“It was a small stone before. I don’t know what will come after that.”

“They will not come to talk with me as long as you are here.”

The prince was unperturbed while the knight repeatedly tried to hold him back.

“Get back. I am not here to scare people.”

“Your Highness…”

“Don’t let me say it twice,” Maximilian commanded, and Carls retreated, his face stern.

The soldiers and knight who had encircled the people also withdrew their spears.

‘Chun~’

Maximilian took a step forward, and his deep eyes glanced over the people. They did not dare look him in the eye as they hurriedly fell to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” came Maximilian’s apology as he looked at the state of the people.

“I am so deeply aware that your lives have suffered due to the imperiousness of the royal family. Therefore, as a member of the royal family, I cannot help but convey words of sincerest regret and apology to you.”

“Your Highness!”

Carls was frightened by the prince’s frank words. The royal family’s dignity would inevitably be undermined if the prince apologized instead of letting the person who committed the blasphemy to be sought out and punished.

‘Shh~’

Maximilian raised his hand, preventing the palace knight from stepping forward, and he said, “We just wanted to make the kingdom a true kingdom. We hoped it would not be taken away, conquered.”

Maximilian told them that the war was to protect Leonberg, which had become increasingly impoverished due to the Empire’s exploitation.

“Therefore, I hope that the royal family and the nobles will live only for Leonberg and Leonberg’s people. I want the resources of the kingdom to be used for the kingdom. Not for the Empire, but for you.”

The prince looked at the people.

“You have lost family. The royal family has also lost a precious person.”

Everyone in Leonberg knew that the queen had fought until the end to protect the citizens of the capital.

“I know how their hearts are.”

Maximilian said he feared that his father and brother, who fought for the kingdom on the frontlines at that very moment, would act as the queen did.

“Nevertheless, the royal family will fight to the end,” the prince stated with an empowered voice.

“We no longer want the kingdom taken from us – taken away and left naked and starving! Because we want the king to live for the kingdom! The nobles to dedicate

themselves to it! For the people to live as a kingdom!"

Maximilian's voice had rung out in the lot; it now lowered.

"You may resent the royal family. I only know one thing: The royal family did not proclaim independence out of self-interest, nor did we move against the Empire for the sake of honor and glory. I hope you know that much," the prince said to the people.

The people showed no reaction. They just kept kneeling, silent, faces to the ground.

Maximilian sighed.

"It doesn't seem any work will be done today, so I think I have to go back."

His face had become exhausted in a short time. Not long after the prince had left, the people who were lying flat on their faces raised their heads gently.

Then, one by one, they started talking.

"Now that I thought about it, the bad apples seem to be those empire guys."

"That's right. It's the Empire who chose to come to our country and make war. They started it. If you consider that, the royal family is also a victim."

"When I see the Empire's robbers that come and go from time to time, I get real upset for the lowly blokes like us. So the royal family must feel even worse – the king and other royals."

"That's right. Have y'all forgotten how much the bastards working for the Empire squeezed us for their masters? The taxmen sent by the Leonbergers don't push us like they did, at least."

The people soon recalled how the royal and imperial nobles had betrayed and used them. And who had killed those nobles?

"The Empire's guys hung the queen's body on the wall. So- They are the rotten people in this world, to treat the mother of our country like that!"

The buzzing murmurs soon became anger. They remembered the last stand of the

queen who refused to flee, who sacrificed herself for the capital's citizens.

"Well."

One woman didn't speak while the other people swore and cursed the imperials and showed compassion for the Leonbergers' situation.

She was the wife of a conscripted soldier who had died battling the Imperial Army on the border.

She stood there with a pained face as she listened to the people talking.

An indescribably complex emotion was on her face, and she was still feeling resentment and anger even if she lacked a direction in which to channel it. Her feeling was also of collapse and self-hatred – and deep grief.

"Mom?"

The girl who had been looking at her mother reached out her little hand, pulling her sleeve. The woman who had been standing, blank, snapped awake, and leaned over to pick up her daughter. She then quietly left.

Someone was looking at the woman from a distance: Carls Ulrich and the other palace knights. The knights, by way of their glances, asked Carls Ulrich what they should do.

"There are so many people… I don't know who threw the stone right now."

It was an awkward response, but no one pointed it out.

* * *

Maximilian continued to travel through the kingdom's great and small settlements to console the war-weary populace. No one any longer accused him of being a hypocrite because his attitude was too consistent. By that time, the resentment toward the royal family, which had existed even after the queen's death, disappeared almost completely.

This was thanks to several rumors that arose from the war, with the Empire trying and letting happen several unsavory things. Of course, feelings of loss and

resentment felt by those who had lost family could not disappear with just a few words. Those words were at least an opportunity for them to realize who their hatred should be directed at, however.

As the public sentiment became heated and united, the second prince was praised all across the kingdom. The people praised his virtues and good works, saying he was a merciful and welcoming man. They also expressed concerns that his health might be weakened by the unreasonable schedule he kept. And in fact, Maximilian was very tired of wandering across the entire kingdom.

His body had become as thin as that of a fasting monk, while his cheeks and eyelids had become as drawn and haggard as those of an ascetic. But in all that time, he had never lost his smile. His eyes remained so gentle and so good.

Even his lean and exhausted face looked reverent and noble. There was even a group of people who referred to him as a saint. Whatever the case, Maximilian didn't care at all about what people called him.

While he wandered in all directions, he did his best to bolster public sentiment in his wake and improve people's lives.

He didn't even release if his body got wet from storms or weakened from his busy schedule.

"Your Highness, let's stop now and go back to the palace," Carls eagerly urged him.

Maximilian didn't listen.

"Numerous soldiers and knights are fighting for Leonberg on the frontlines. My brother and his Majesty are fighting for life and death against the wicked Imperial Army, and their bodies suffer. Compared to that, what I'm doing is nothing."

Maximilian said that this was the only thing he could do, and Carls Ulrich gave a long, regretful sigh. Carls did not know where the prince's feelings of guilt originated from.

Was he disillusioned in himself for escaping the capital when the queen remained? Or was it his skepticism about needing to remain behind while his father and brother fought on the front lines?

Carls could understand Maximilian's feelings fully because he also had to leave the capital without the queen and had to remain in the rear even though others were fighting for their lives.

He, too, was not free from guilt. That was why he so struggled to get the second prince to stand still, but Carls adjusted to the schedule in subtle ways. He reduced the distance traveled all at once and increased the number of breaks taken while traveling. When the prince questioned this, Carls said it was for the sake of the weary soldiers.

Once, the wheel of a supply wagon was deliberately broken to delay the schedule. Nevertheless, the prince's schedule was still tough. It was no easy task to move through the wilderness in winter, with blizzards raging. If the war hadn't suddenly ended, Maximilian would have collapsed on his journey.

"It is said that all the imperial forces on the border have withdrawn!"

The second prince had, in fact, almost reached his limit when the news came that the war was at an end.

"They say the Empire signed a humiliating treaty and pledged to pay heftily in compensation for the war! The Empire also transferred dozens of fortresses and strongholds near Leonberg's border and gave up ownership of that area!" the messenger shouted in an excited voice. "The kingdom has won the war against the empire!"

Maximilian stumbled.

"Your Highness!"

The palace knights rushed in and supported the prince, helping him upright.

"Is his Majesty and my brother safe?" Maximilian asked the messenger.

"Both of them are safe!"

"Ahh." Only did the second prince sigh in relief.

"His Majesty is now returning with the fleet. His Highness the Crown Prince said that he would return to the palace as soon as the front lines are cleared up and

organized!"

As the messenger said this, the second prince took a few breaths and spoke again.

"I commend you for your hard work, you who must have run day and night to bring the news. Good work."

"I don't feel the hardness of travel – such is my joy," the messenger responded with a smile, then said there were many other places he had to deliver the news to.

"The kingdom has won!

"I knew the Crown Prince would do it!"

Knights and soldiers started cheering then, and everyone had faces brighter than ever before.

Carls Ulrich also smiled as he cheered the kingdom's victory. But he soon remembered his duties and said to the second prince, "Let's go back to the royal palace."

This time, Maximilian did not reject his request.

"When your brother returns, someone will have to greet him."

It was decided on that spot that all would return to the palace.

"As soon as we return, we can prepare for my brother's triumphal ceremony," the second prince said with a bright face.

* * *

The royal palace's gate had been closed for a while; it was open once more.

The second prince brought all his brothers and sisters who had fled to Balahard back to the capital, and he didn't forget to prepare the ceremony for the Crown Prince's upcoming triumph.

The kingdom was set to pay the highest possible honor to Prince Adrian, as befitted the protagonist of the great victory. The capital's citizens actively cooperated in

arranging the event.

They roamed through mountains and fields, gathering petals for the triumph, or they took out their best kegs and willingly dedicated them for upcoming events.

The royal family and the citizens meaningfully prepared the ceremony with one heart. The scale of it was great and grand, its scope unprecedented in Leonberg's history.

All that remained was for the hero of the war to make his return.

"They say that His Highness the Crown Prince is a day away from the capital!"

And finally, he came back: The great hero and his army who had destroyed countless imperial legions and finally forced the Empire to suffer the humiliation of a one-sided peace treaty.

The Crown Prince, proudly bearing the banner of the crouching lion, stood before the capital's gates.

"Brother!" the second prince cried out. "I am very glad you came back safe and healthy."

Maximilian seemed to have forgotten all the words of welcome he had prepared in his heart.

Prince Adrian softly smiled as he looked at his brother, and he spoke.

"…brought someone home."

His voice was so soft that Maximilian had failed to hear the front words. When he asked his brother what he meant, the Crown Prince, instead of answering, pointed to something behind him.

There was a coffin, embossed all over in golden lions. The citizens and soldiers had been about to cheer the Crown Prince's return when they shut their mouths at once. This was because they knew all too well who the owner of the coffin covered in royal flags was. There was only one Leonberger who had passed away in the war. It was the queen, she who chose to die for the citizens of the capital. The atmosphere of jubilation, the expectation of the triumph, became unclear. Then the Crown Prince

spoke up as he looked at the people lined up along the walls, streets, and plaza.

“A memorial, an expression of condolences, is enough to celebrate this victory.”

It was low-key but loud enough for the capital’s citizens to hear. Silence reigned over the capital for a moment – a silence that was quickly broken.

“For Queen Margarita,” a knight said as he drew his sword and pointed it into the air at an angle.

That was the beginning.

‘Schuuck~’

The knights and soldiers of the capital raised their swords and spears and expressed their respect at once.

“For the brave and compassionate queen.”

The citizens grasped the situation moments later and started crying out.

“For the queen who was wiser and more devoted than anyone else!”

“Glory to Queen Margarita!”

Shouts rang out all along the walls and streets. The Crown Prince looked at the scene and began moving again.

“All glory to you,” a whisper escaped from his lips.

CHAPTER 204
THE EMBERS IN THE FURNACE REMAIN THE SAME (2)

Citizens shouted from the depth of their throats as they called out the queen's name. Soldiers and knights also paid homage to the queen and the royal family as they angled their spears skyward.

The Crown Prince walked silently down the middle of the boulevard while those knights and soldiers bearing the queen's coffin followed him.

The triumphant appearance of a victorious general who defeated the forces of the great Empire was nowhere in evidence. It was certainly not the scene Maximilian had imagined.

He had thought the triumph would have been a lively festival full of cheers for the war heroes and warriors who defeated the overwhelming might of the imperial army.

Still, he wasn't disappointed. Rather, he wept several times while walking along the capital's central boulevard with his brother. Maximilian couldn't stop admiring the procession.

He kept thinking about the thoughtfulness of his brother, who gave the glory that was his by right to the dead. While Maximilian reflected on the state of his heart, his brother said shyly, "This is how they do it in Balahard."

He stated that he was merely following the customs of the deceased's homeland.

After they walked along the capital's boulevard for a while, they finally arrived at the royal palace.

"You are back hale, brother. Congratulations on the victory."

Maximilian finally congratulated his brother on his safe return and handed over

stewardship of the royal palace to him, a position Maximilian had held for a while.

“Thank you.”

The brothers nodded shyly at each other.

* * *

Once the Leonbergers who had left returned, the palace regained its former hustle and bustle.

Of course, it couldn’t be completely the same – there were too many empty seats for that.

Many would never be seen again after the recent war: The queen and the maids who had followed her; so many palace knights; the palace’s soldiers.

No one could fill Their absence. Nevertheless, it was true that the palace was revived to some extent, and at its center were those through which the blood of the Leonberger royal family coursed.

“Brother! Brother!”

Maximilian found his brother without having to put up much of a search.

“Did you eat? This guy is so thin that he’s going to fall into a crack in the floor,” the Crown Prince greeted his brother casually. The surviving palace knights and maids happily watched the two brothers: The Crown Prince, praised as the Young Lion of the North, and the second prince, hallowed as a saint. They were the two most outstanding brothers in Leonberg’s history, their actions legendary, so everyone was glad that they looked healthy.

The Great Marshal also couldn’t hide his feelings of joy when he met the two brothers.

“It’s really funny.” Prince Adrian hated it.

“Has your Highness heard the news?” Bielefeld asked.

“What news?”

“It is said that an envoy of the Teuton Kingdom has landed at the eastern port.”

“From the Teuton Kingdom?”

“At one time, it was a country that exerted tremendous influence and played a leading role in the politics of the continent’s western nations. Of course, their prestige now lies broken by the Empire. Their influence and majesty are not the same as in the past. Still, they are great enough not to be ignored.”

The Crown Prince had begun to show interest.

“In fact, the Kingdom of Teuton is also a country with which his Majesty tried to form an alliance for a long time. However, it was not possible to achieve great results at that time, due to Leonberg having no choice but to follow the Empire’s diktats.”

The Marquis of Bielefeld smiled a bitter smile, saying that, to be precise, Teuton had summarily ignored Leonberg’s envoys.

“It was not an alliance they wanted to form, saying that they dared not risk giving the Empire any pretexts. But things swiftly changed,” Bielefeld said, his eyes twinkling. “By the way, the Teuton Kingdom, which had remained silent after we had sent countless envoys to them, has now sent their first delegation to us. They express their intention of forming an alliance with Leonberg.”

Leonberg’s victory in the war must have changed their thinking.

“The king is planning to give away his beloved princess.”

The prince had been listening to the story with an anticipation-filled face. As Bielefeld said this, that face hardened.

“Princess?”

“The purpose of their delegation’s visit is to cement a marriage between the two royal families,” the Marquis of Bielefeld went on to say. “Because there is no greater alliance than one formed through blood ties.”

The Crown Prince looked at the marquis, shakily nodding in agreement.

“What they want is a young lion from the north,” Bielefeld told the Crown Prince and

laughed perniciously. “They want it to happen right away.”

Prince Adrian’s face became distorted.

* * *

By the time that Teuton’s delegation neared the capital, the city was in an uproar.

“What? My brother disappeared?” Maximilian asked with a shocked face as he heard the palace knight’s report. “Where does he mean to go during this most important of times?”

Arwen Kirgayen had stood to the back with a sad face. She now stepped forward.

“He only left this letter.”

It was so very short that the piece of paper could scarcely be called a letter.

“I have something to do, so I’m going to the north for a while.”

Maximilian laughed as he read that single line, as it was all that had been written.

“But why, at this important juncture?”

Maximilian knew how spontaneous his older brother was, but this time his timing wasn’t good. It was the exact period when important guests would arrive at the capital. These guests were the Teuton Kingdom’s delegation, and it was an alliance that the royal family had spent a long time seeking.

And this was no delegation which one could stroll barefoot toward and meet; no, its leader was a great giant of a man: Duncan Seymour Tudor.

So much of a celebrity was Duncan that even the second prince of an isolated kingdom knew of his deeds. Duncan was the only duke of the Teuton kingdom, the only brother to the current king of that realm, and his most trusted adviser. He was the Lord of the Rosethorn Knights, who are said to be the strongest knights in existence.

Duncan Seymour Tudor was called ‘The West’s Number One Knight.’

He was a true legend who had achieved a high status and fame in his life, and not in an easy manner. He was a person whose name was well known to the second prince, and not merely because he was a member of a royal family. Moreover, it wasn't just Duncan Seymour Tudor in the delegation.

There was also Hestia Neumann Tudor, the eldest daughter of the family and the most cherished princess of the King of Teuton. Hestia was a celebrity whose name was known across the continent, though not as much as Duncan's. Hestia was described as 'The most beautiful rose in the Tudor royal garden.'

Of course, her reputation didn't merely revolve around her beauty; she was also a big shot when it came to the political scene. The Teuton King's most cherished princess was not a being who could be ignored. All the important persons of the realm that were meant to welcome them were away, however.

The king's situation was such that it would take some time for him to return from his expedition, and the Crown Prince in charge of the capital was clearly not inclined to be present.

The situation was crazy for Maximilian, and he was jumping to rectify it.

He ordered that the crystal ball connected to the north be brought to him.

((You mean his Highness the Crown Prince has disappeared?))

Count Balahard was unaware of the prince's vanishment.

((He has only been in the capital for a while, so why is he gone?))

Maximilian briefly explained the situation to Vincent, who asked what the second prince wanted to know. Maximilian told him that the prince had received the message that the Teuton delegation had arrived at the eastern port, seeking to arrange a marriage with him. He went on to say that his elder brother had disappeared just as the delegation was about to reach the capital.

((Nothing has been decided, and he fled? No, he doesn't like to attend unwanted events, so he might be hiding for a while))

Maximilian sympathized with Vincent's summary of things.

“What the hell is he thinking? He is the Crown Prince of the country, the firstborn. Even if he doesn’t like it, he must know how important it is to meet potential allies.”

((Why do you even question his behavior? The only thing on his mind is war, war, and war))

Maximilian could not dispute the count’s statement, so his mood grew even darker.

The Empire was locked in a civil war, making it hard for them to look outside their borders, but many countries were still under the Empire’s attentive gaze.

It was no light matter for Teuton to dispatch a delegation in such a situation.

And domestically, this was the first official visit of a foreign diplomatic mission to Leonberg, which had been cut off from the world by the Empire.

Moreover, the purpose wasn’t just an alliance, but a marriage between the two royal families.

If the marriage ended smoothly, Leonberg would cement another alliance alongside that of Dotrin. Even if Maximilian greeted the distinguished guests and devoted himself to the matter with all his heart, it would never be enough. It was the Crown Prince who had to greet these important visitors, and he had gone into hiding at the last moment.

And now Maximilian would have to dance naked in front of the Teutons. Even though Maximilian had expressed his undying support for his brother, he could not help but resent him this time.

((But since he said he’s going north, he couldn’t have gone anywhere else. I’ll unleash the rangers right now and ask them to determine his Highness’s whereabouts))

“Would you, please? If you find him, please persuade him to return to the capital as soon as possible,” Maximilian requested and ended his communication with Count Balahard.

“I should not have spoken. It looks like this old man is to blame.”

When Marshal Bielefeld heard the news later and visited Maximilian, he laid the blame on himself.

“It is commonsense that the person in charge of a delegation cannot meet with them without knowing the purpose of their visit,” said Maximilian. “You did nothing wrong, Great Marshal. Don’t blame yourself.”

“That’s right, though. Huh. What do we do about this?”

“In the worst case, I think I’ll have to go ahead and greet them.”

“They will think us rude from the beginning if they are not properly greeted,” Bielefeld spat out as he gave a wry chuckle, a strong expression of embarrassment coming to his face. Maximilian’s face was no different from that of the marquis.

“I just want my brother to come back in time.”

There was no sign that Maximilian’s elder brother would return after his reckless disappearance, however. All Maximilian learned was that Count Balahard had not achieved much after being asked to help.

That was the day the delegation arrived.

“He really doesn’t seem to be coming.”

Maximilian sighed and left the palace to greet the delegation.

After he had stood by the capital’s gate and waited for a while, a group of horsemen rode from afar over the plain, and as they halted, informed Maximilian that the delegation’s arrival was imminent.

“Let it not be told that the army and knights of Leonberg are terrible!” Maximilian ordered sternly, and the capital guards and palace knights once more checked their gear and corrected their postures.

“I see the delegation over there!”

Maximilian enhanced his eyesight as he looked across the plain, and sure enough, there was Teuton’s diplomatic mission. There rode a hundred Teutonic knights who still remained alert even after being under strong escort for four weeks by Leonberg’s knights and cavalry who had met them at the port. They were fully-armed knights in bright red armor, clearly being the Rosethorn Knights who had such a glorious reputation across the continent.

“Are you sure?” Maximilian asked as others discussed the Rosethorns. It was too early for admiration, however. The real deal wasn’t the hundred mounted Rosethorn Knights. The red-armored knights surrounded a horse-drawn carriage, atop which sat an elderly gentleman.

“Ah…”

The moment Maximilian saw him, he knew that he was Duncan Seymour Tudor, the number one knight in the west. And it was easy to know this – the man was like a giant. From the moment that Duncan appeared, Leonberg’s knights couldn’t even breathe properly. Even from among the palace knights, who knew no fear, there came a few suppressed groans.

Some figures stood before the knights that were being crushed by Duncan’s energy. They were the kingdom’s champions, the Crown Prince’s knights.

Arwen Kirgayen modestly maintained her energy, while Bernardo Eli offered an open challenge as he revealed his presence. Leonberg’s knights were able to catch their breaths and correct their disturbed postures, but that had been all.

Even after the champions who had made great strides in the war against the Empire had let their energy flow, the kingdom’s knights were still barely breathing. The presence of Duncan Seymour Tudor still dominated the area. The presence of the champions was akin to a firefly in front of the moon. Maximilian sighed.

He knew that the Teuton Kingdom had not considered Leonberg as a candidate for an equal alliance up until recently. So, he had decided to greet them confidently, but from the first, the meeting had become a broken, lopsided affair.

Maximilian couldn’t help it; Duncan Seymour Tudor was a real monster.

The second prince stepped forward, trying to correct his expression.

And at that moment- ‘Ooh~ Ooh~’

A great presence suddenly arose from behind the gate. Simultaneously, Duncan’s energy, which had pressed upon the knights, was dissipated, as if it was never there.

“Ah…”

Maximilian's head started throbbing. He was very familiar with the tremendous energy being unleashed behind his back. Maximilian turned his head.

"Brother!"

And there he was, the very prince whose return Maximilian had been awaiting all this time.

"You're late."

The Crown Prince passed through the city gate and went to stand next to Maximilian.

He clucked his tongue, saying, "That's funny."

At that moment, Maximilian thought that it was unreasonable for a customer who had come with friendly intentions to be threatened by the establishment's owner.

And the Teutonic delegation came to a halt before them.

"Welcome to the Kingdom of Leonberg," Adrian Leonberger said with a fierce smile.

CHAPTER 205
THE EMBERS IN THE FURNACE REMAIN THE SAME (3)

Duncan Seymour Tudor was indeed a nobleman from birth.

If he hadn't given up the throne by his own will, he would have become the ruler of his country. Even after he gave up the throne, he remained the only Duke of Teuton and a knight who stood at the top of the kingdom, earning respect and praise from many people.

In short, he was a great man who didn't want to play the role of escort.

If it weren't for the princess's mission, he would never have come to such a far-off country as an envoy. Of course, he didn't accept to head the diplomatic mission only because he loved his niece.

Teuton had once been the leading nation on the western part of the continent; it had now lost its former glory and was declining day by day due to pressures of neighboring countries who carried the Empire on their backs.

Although the Empire was engulfed in a civil war and the threat of neighboring countries had lessened, the situation would not last long. At this rate, the glorious Teuton Kingdom would soon have no choice but to fall in line with the other western countries.

The Tudor family made every effort to create opportunities and reverse the trend.

One of these strategies was the alliance with the Kingdom of Leonberg, and that was the reason Duncan Seymour Tudor had come to a faraway country. Of course, there was no intention of forming an alliance straight off. It was first necessary to check whether Leonberg qualified for an alliance with Teuton.

This was one of the duties Duncan had received from the king – he had to look at Leonberg with open eyes. The reality of the kingdom he had entered was

disappointing. The port was narrow and cramped, and only a few ships fared from Leonberg's waters to Teuton's. The roads were full of potholes, and the cities were poor. The nobles Duncan had encountered on the way to the capital were more like village chiefs in the countryside, and the citizens seemed mere peasants.

It was unbelievable that such a country had won the war against the Empire.

The only thing that Duncan found worth looking at was the knights and soldiers who had met him. Their energy was quite good – even if they weren't that great when compared to the Teutonic knights under Duncan's command. Duncan did not know whether the Empire was weaker than he had expected or whether Leonberg possessed potential unknown to him.

Wherever he went, he was overwhelmed with disappointment, but he did not give up his search.

Winning the war against the grasping empire was by no means impossible, so Duncan believed that there had to be something he didn't know about.

But as Duncan crossed Leonberg, he found there to be nothing special about the kingdom. The Kingdom of Leonberg was exactly as it was known to be: A needy country on the continent's northernmost tip.

Duncan was quite disappointed and became skeptical about the delegation's mission. It seemed that his judgment had been premature, however. He knew it the moment he saw the soldiers and knights who met the delegation at the capital's gate. The aura of the knights shone clear, and there were no jagged edges to be seen. The soldiers were well-disciplined and as sharp as swords.

They were very different from the Leonbergians Duncan had seen thus far, and for the first time, he was interested in the kingdom. He revealed the energy he had kept hidden all the time. The lesser reason was to test their foundation, but he largely did it to enlighten them of the gap between Teuton and Leonberg and so gain the upper hand in future discussions.

However, even if he had bared all his energy, the effect had been unsatisfactory.

He succeeded in showing the superiority of his power, but that was all.

The knights of Leonberg showed no signs of submission in the face of Duncan's

overwhelming momentum. It was only their energy and breathing that was disturbed. And even that lasted for only a moment when Leonberg's quad knights stepped out and faced his energy with their bodies, letting the knights and soldier regain their comportment. One of them couldn't hide her womanly figure even though her body was covered with iron armor, and the other was a knight with a somewhat decadent air about him.

Duncan couldn't help but admire them, even if only a little. They had the courage to stand without hesitation and face such an overwhelming gap in energy. The fact that their faces showed no distraction while facing his unbearable presence also impressed Duncan. But it wasn't these quad knights of the kingdom that Duncan came to truly admire.

There was a young man who stood beneath the golden lion's banner, the symbol of the Leonberger royal family. His presence felt less than that of a quad-chain knight, yet his energy was so clear and clean. Not one word had been spoken, but the greeting was already adequate.

Duncan was convinced that the man was the young lion from the north, who had gained a great reputation in recent years. His energy and appearance were exceptionally mild, not enough to be called a lion, but his reputation on the battlefield was an established fact, and that was what was important to Duncan. The fact that the Leonberger family also had such a fine warrior pleased him. It was good to know that the Kingdom of Leonberg possessed its own powerful personage. It would have been difficult if the person who was to become his nephew had been weak, contrary to the reputation he currently held.

"Well?" Duncan asked in a smug tone. He suddenly trembled, as if having been hit by lightning. A tremendous energy was approaching from the side of the gate, from beyond the crowd who met the delegation. It was as if an enormous fortress had suddenly risen in front of Duncan; as if tens of thousands of troops were suddenly charging.

Duncan swore that he had never encountered such energy in his life. Goosebumps invaded his whole body as every hair, from the downy strands on his belly to the tips of the hair on his head, stood upright. A cold chill ran through his back.

He managed to suppress the groan that had risen to his lips and sought out the master of the energy. It wasn't difficult; that great presence was such a tremendous

thing that it could not be easily hidden. A man had come out of the crowd and now stood under the Leonberger family banner.

“Ah!”

Duncan realized it at that moment: The person who he had thought to be the lion of the north was a different member of the Leonberger clan. There was a real lion present. His head sat proudly upon his shoulders like a true maned lion, and his fierce energy was like that of a wild beast. The man stretched his lips, and his fierce smile was lionesque, showing no favor.

* * *

Formal greetings came and went by way of the interpreter.

I meanwhile looked at Duncan Seymour Tudor, and he did not avoid my gaze. The man definitely deserved to be called the number one knight in the west. He was the strongest Ring Knight I had ever seen, and I suspected that there was a penta-chain knight under my very nose.

I was not sure, but I figured that very few knights of the ring could beat him, certainly none of the people I’ve ever met. Perhaps if I had met him at another time and another place, I would certainly have paid homage to his achievements.

But not so now, for today, Duncan Tudor was not a knight who had risen to the greatest height to me. He was a ruthless man who had forgotten his place as a guest by threatening his hosts.

And it wasn’t just that. The other bothersome factor of the Teuton delegation was that the eldest daughter of the Tudor family didn’t show her face at all. Although I was asked to understand that the long trip weakened her body, it made the greeting ceremony a decidedly one-sided affair.

I did not like the lack of chivalry and rude behavior of their delegation and the fact that they saw our kingdom as beneath them grated on my nerves.

The anger had swelled within me, but I forced it to subside for now. I couldn’t chase away guests who had come to form an alliance before talking with them – even if one of those guests was a nasty piece of work who had threatened his hosts.

“Brother, I will take things from here.”

Fortunately, Maximilian recognized my feelings and said that he would guide the delegation by himself. Duncan Seymour Tudor glanced at me and then disappeared as he followed Maximilian.

“Hahaha,” I laughed at Duncan, who had remained arrogant until the end.

“Let’s see how long you will be so arrogant.”

I bet that, sooner or later, he would surely pay the price for today’s affront – I would make it happen. It was fortunate not to have to do the tiring job of serving the envoys, so I comforted myself with that thought and headed to my palace. It turned out it would’ve been better had I guided the delegation.

“Your Highness, isn’t it time for you to fill your position as a crown prince?”

The Marquis of Bielefeld had been waiting for me at my palace; he now came and started to scold me.

“If you went away, they might have left. If you come to the table, they can come to terms with us.”

“Shouldn’t you give them a message?” “Don’t you know how meek Maximilian can be?”

“Do you have any idea how important this mission is to Leonberg?”

The nagging continued endlessly.

“I did leave a letter,” I said at last.

“You mean that letter with no due date of return or any detailed explanation of circumstances?”

After I had made my excuse, I heard only more henpecking and badgering. So I shut my mouth then and waited for the marshal to calm down.

“Fwoo. What the hell was so important that your Highness was away at such an important time?” Bielefeld asked with a sigh after his long nagging session.

“Montpellier.”

When the capital was under attack, Montpellier and his fled northward. All the people who had fled together returned to the capital. Only Montpellier had remained in the north.

“I suddenly remembered that I forgot all about him.”

My abrupt absence had been to bring Montpellier back to the city.

“Why is he suddenly-?”

“Because he’s the sneakiest of guys. It’s never safe if you don’t put him in a visible place.”

The marshal’s face became grim as he heard my words.

“But for that? Is that the only reason to leave at this critical time?”

Bielefeld continued to condemn my actions, asking if it wouldn’t have been enough for me to order someone to go and fetch Montpellier. I told him the truth.

“No. By then, it would’ve been too late.”

“Is the man so good at running from places, then?”

“It’s not that. I had to do it, and get it done right.”

I then told the marshal why I had fetched Montpellier at this time.

“I’m thinking of entrusting the negotiations with the Teuton Kingdom’s delegation to Montpellier.”

“How the hell can your Highness believe in Montpellier and entrust important matters of state to him?” the Marquis of Bielefeld asked me, his face showing me that he wondered what shit plan I had. My response was profound.

“It seems that the Great Marshal has already forgotten that the man had been one of the few marquis of the Empire until recently.”

“What does that matter?”

“It means that he has a lot of information.”

“If that’s all it is, it makes more sense to force the information from him and leave the negotiations to someone else.”

Bielefeld seemed to know all too well how to deal with Montpellier, and this made me very happy. But apart from that sense of satisfaction, my opinion was different from his.

“No. I have already decided to leave this work to Montpellier.”

The marshal asked me why.

“It’s best for Montpellier to be doing something to help us out.”

Even if he had become far less powerful in the kingdom, Montpellier wasn’t incompetent. Rather, he was a person of supreme competence. Of all the people I knew, Montpellier was the best when it came to using words to reach an end, provided he wasn’t being threatened by a spear or a knife.

In fact, Leonberg almost collapsed onto its own roots under the attentions of Montpellier’s three-forked tongue.

“If we think of him as an enemy, we can only punish him. If we think about him as an ally, there are many places where he can be put to use.”

He had proved his talent whilst serving as a man of the Empire. Moreover, the possibility of betrayal was slim because Montpellier had nowhere to go. The only path open to him was to settle himself in Leonberg.

“I bet he will see this as an opportunity and hang onto it with his life.”

And when I thought about the Teuton delegation’s plans being overturned by the nasty Montpellier, I had to laugh. Unlike me, the Marquis of Bielefeld was honest and decent. He didn’t seem to like using Montpellier for such an important task. Still, he didn’t go against me.

The marshal simply advised that Count Siorin Kirgayen be added to the negotiations

to prevent Montpellier from doing a bunch of crap.

I also had no intention to entrust Montpellier alone with the job, so I readily accepted the marshal's proposal. When the work was done, Adelia opened the door and entered my room.

"Your Highness. I will tidy your hair."

Only then did I realize that my hair had become messy after flying on the wyvern.

"Please do."

Once my permission was given, Adelia started to straighten up my hair.

When she was done, someone entered, looking for me. It was Arwen.

"Your Highness. If you had at least given me a proper word, the uproar wouldn't have grown so great."

Her gaze was fixed on Adelia as she said this, and a rare emotion of regret passed over her face. It seemed that Adelia had suffered while I had left without telling her.

"We'll go together next time," I promised.

"Next time, you won't disappear without leaving a message and making trouble for others," Arwen replied coldly, her mouth set into a sneer. I merely laughed at her frank appearance.

"Keep that in mind," Arwen stressed in a softer tone and left. Next came Carls.

"Your Highness! Really, how long have I been your Highness's knight? If you're going to leave me in the dark like this every time, you might as well throw me out!"

Even if Carls was angry while he complained, his face showed his sincere regret at being marginalized many times whenever I disappeared.

"I promise that it won't happen in the future."

I managed to soothe Carls as well. Bernardo Eli came to me then.

“Must I comfort you as well?” I asked him.

“What are you talking about? I knew you would come back, and you came back in time.”

“Aren’t you angry?”

“No way. I’m just happy that you’re back.”

“Then why come here and waste words?”

Eli shut his mouth when he heard me speak so sternly, then rolled his eyeballs and asked me, “But Sir Arwen-”

“End it!”

I ruthlessly drove him out. Next to come to my room was Maximilian.

“Brother! Brother! Brother!” he kept calling out to me.

“You want to nag, too?” I asked Maximilian. He shook his head.

“I resented the fact that I couldn’t reach you and ask you to come back, brother. But now it’s okay. You were a little late, but at least you came back in time.”

“Aren’t you curious about what I have been up to in the north?”

“If there is anything I need to know, you would have told me right away,” he said in a soft tone.

“I brought back that Montpellier guy who buried himself in the north.”

I told Maximilian what I wanted to do with Montpellier, and he didn’t even question my plan. He merely raised his thumb and said it was a good idea.

I smiled as I saw Maximilian’s sturdy attitude and told him something I had not revealed to Bielefeld.

“It’s not only Montpellier that I brought from the north.”

Maximilian waited for me, his eyes shining like lanterns.

“It’s really this I wanted to fetch,” I said, puffing up my breast as I pulled a large chest from a cupboard, opened it, and showed its contents to Maximilian.

“This…” His eyes stretched wide.

“Let’s see if they will be so pompous after seeing this,” I muttered as I recalled the arrogant Teutons.

CHAPTER 206
THE EMBERS IN THE FURNACE REMAIN THE SAME (4)

On occasion, there were those knights who had risen to the highest level, and who were not concerned with the quality of a sword. They were of the class of people who believed that only victory gained through pure skill and not reliance on good steel was worthwhile.

They consciously insisted only on using ordinary swords, as they thought that would prove their level. In my opinion, they were pure idiots.

They would say that those who dwelt on the quality of a blade were too lazy to hone the skills of their bodies by relying excessively on the sword's nature.

'If my energy replaces the sword's marvelous forging, then what is the use of a great sword?'

Among the Masters of the past, there were those who proudly showed off such stupid beliefs.

They were proud of their skill of cutting through hard armor and cleaving through rocks with blunt training swords. They took great pride in their ability to face hundreds of blades by wielding cheap long swords forged from weak iron. The power of the Aura Blade had blinded them.

They even dismissed other Masters who wielded excellent swords as charlatans who depended on their swords' quality. And they all died – under the hands of the Masters who they had criticized as being fake. It was only natural that, if their skills were equal, the warrior with the better quality weapon would hold the advantage. Even if they expended mana on the same level, an Aura Blade on a poor piece of iron was not the same as one blazing on a mastercraft sword.

Where a cheap longsword had only the energy of a knight to depend on, a great sword had both the energy and the bite of its steel counting in its favor.

The difference was, by no means, small.

In a game where the slightest edge separated life and death, a sword of good quality provided that edge.

In addition, if the sword wasn't just a high-quality sword, but a great sword made by dwarves, the difference became even greater.

The swords in the chest were such mastercrafted weapons. No, they were more than that – these were swords forged not by ordinary dwarves, but masterpieces especially forged by meisters.

These were devils among swords that could not easily be cut through by Aura Blades.

Maximilian could not avert his gaze from the chest after seeing its contents. For a guy who was usually restrained, the desire shone brightly in his eyes.

"To bring these here!" Maximilian exclaimed as he snapped out of it. I nodded.

"If the Teutons know that we have the means to supply Leonberg with dwarven weapons, they will not so easily turn their eyes away from us. Human relationships function along the lines of what it takes to make the poorer side bend and bow. The relationship between one country and another is no different."

"Brother, to me, it sounds like you plan to sell these things to the Teuton Kingdom," Maximilian said, his eyes wide and his face set as if he had heard the absurdest thing.

"That's right. Is there a problem with that?"

"I thought you were preparing this as a gift before your marriage, brother."

I thought about Maximilian's words.

"Sounds decent!" I exclaimed. I haven't thought about the marriage, and a gift might be in order.

"But it'll be only a sample. I won't be ripped off by those who came here, and I won't be giving them things for free. Why would I do such a stupid thing?"

Even though we were supplied with a good amount of dwarven weapons, our trade had been blocked off by the Empire, and we haven't found the right client to sell to yet. Now a customer has come to my doorstep, however. If I missed this opportunity, I would be the world's greatest fool. Maximilian was left speechless for a while by my confident attitude. It was only after some time that he spoke up with a foolish-looking face.

"I don't know how it'll look if a prince of our country goes to bargain directly, like a businessman."

I gave a cold laugh as I heard his words.

"The duke of their country comes to this far-off land to buy and sell people. Is it so big a deal for me to then sell a few swords and some armor?"

Their delegation's goal was marriage; it was they who decided to come and sell their princess's hand for political purposes. If that was their purpose from the beginning, there was no reason why I couldn't call it what it was.

"Brother! How can you say such a thing?"

Maximilian was frightened. He nagged me, saying that it was impossible to talk in such bad terms of a marriage between royal families. Of course, his words barely passed into my ears.

"Okay. I have no intention of marrying into a family that looks down upon Leonberg."

To be precise, I had no intention of getting married.

I was angered by the imperial tyranny and had decided to become king, but I never forgot my true aim: To achieve the highest level and finally reach transcendence. That was what I longed for most. It was not a goal I could ever achieve by sitting around on a throne all the time; I would have no choice but to leave the kingdom in order to transcend. It would be irresponsible for me to marry.

"How can a Crown Prince have no intention of marrying?" Maximilian asked. "You are the one who will become king."

"You speak as if I am the only one in the royal family."

“What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. I am not the only Leonberger. I mean, there are other fine princes present.”

“Brother!” Maximilian shouted as he belatedly realized the meaning of my words.

“I’m not deaf. Don’t shout.”

“Why the hell are you doing this? Isn’t it time for you to accept your position as Crown Prince?”

Maximilian continued to nag at me, his mouth set in a grimace.

“Are you so anxious about being sold?” I asked after a while to stop his grumbling.

“It isn’t like that! Brother, your marriage is not your own personal matter! You still don’t know how important this alliance is to the kingdom!” came Maximilian’s excited screams.

“Yes, I know. I’m trying to get the best deal out of it.”

“Brother.”

“And one way to do that would be to let you marry Teuton’s princess.”

After I said this, I found the idea to be quite plausible, so I started to think about it seriously. Maximilian had originally been betrothed to someone from a young age. However, the marriage was delayed due to the fact that the Crown Prince of the kingdom remained unwed.

Then the major purge took place in Leonberg, and among the nobles who were executed, there were family members of the woman engaged to Maximilian.

As a result, the marriage was terminated, and Maximilian remained unwed even though he was older than twenty, which was rare for royalty. It was a shame.

“What the hell are you thinking! I have no intention of being a shameless person who intervenes in his brother’s marriage!”

“We haven’t discussed the terms of the marriage yet, but what’s immoral about it?”

“Brother!” Maximilian jumped up.

“If they need a marriage to form the alliance anyway, anyone of Leonberger’s blood should do. And besides, she’ll be happier with you than with a bastard like me.”

“Brother!”

“Why are you shouting so much today! All right, so- Come here.”

I grabbed Maximilian’s hand – he looked like he would have a seizure right away – and forcibly dragged him to the chest. Then I pulled out a set of iron armor that was stored therein. It was a full-plate armor with a helm.

“Try it on. It’s yours.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a special armor made by the dwarven meisters. Even an Aura Blade will not easily split it. So in the future, if there is a danger to your life, make sure you wear it when you go outside.”

Maximilian looked freaked out by my sudden gift.

“Brother…”

Then his eyes almost teared up. He seemed to have forgotten about our recent exchange, his face once more belonging to his usual gentle self.

“I can’t take it. I would rather that you wear it, brother. Or give it to his Majesty.”

“His Majesty also has a set that has been separately forged.”

As I said this, I pulled out another suit of armor from the chest.

“I want him to live. I’m always nervous about him.”

Even if the king’s skills would prove insignificant, at least he would be able to remain standing on the battlefield, not easily dying from the touch of blades.

Maximilian had refused the gift almost to the end, but he could not overcome my stubbornness and accepted the armor.

“I will cherish it like my life.”

“Tcha. It’s just pieces of iron, no matter how precious. There’s nothing dumber than valuing material gifts as much as your survival.”

Maximilian once more looked at me, touched by my words.

“Even swords, the quality of which I value, are nothing more than pieces of metal when compared to your life.”

“You sound serious. I will keep your words in mind, brother.”

I happily laughed as I saw Maximilian clutching his armor as if it was a treasure from heaven.

“Go now. I’m tired after the long journey.”

Maximilian hurried away, realizing that I had been to the far north.

It seemed that he had forgotten the conversation we had a while ago.

“The nagging prince is a noble man,” I said with a smile as I watched the door through which Maximilian had disappeared.

Contrary to my words, I didn’t feel regret. I was just relieved that the members of the royal family would not so easily fade away.

“Huh. I’m tired.”

After all the uninvited guests who had obstructed my rest have been driven out, I went straight to bed.

“Your Highness, can I take a seat?”

Adelia had appeared terrifyingly swiftly after Maximilian had left, and she had made my bed.

“Thanks,” I said, greeting her, and Adelia laughed abashedly.

“I will sit on this side. Please sleep comfortably.”

I looked at Adelia sitting on my bed and closed my eyes. In my ears, I began hearing her humming softly.

“What song is that?” I asked as I slowly opened my eyes, and Adelia spoke, almost apologetically.

“This is a song I often sang when my younger brother couldn’t sleep well. I don’t think your Highness can go to sleep, these days…”

I had so much to think about: The emperor’s identity, this thing with Teuton.

“No.”

I reached out my hand, stroked Adelia’s hair, and closed my eyes again.

“Keep singing.”

Adelia started humming for me again.

How old was I, to be enjoying a lullaby? I felt absurd. It was true that Adelia’s song made me feel at ease, however. I soon fell asleep to the sound of her humming.

* * *

‘Highness.’

‘Your Highness, wake up.’

As I heard a hazy voice, I awoke from sleep.

“Your Highness.”

Arwen was looking at me.

“Is it time for dinner already?”

A small dinner had been planned to welcome Teuton's delegation. I was supposed to be there as well.

"The dinner has been postponed. It is morning, your Highness."

But the dinner had been delayed.

"Why was there no dinner?"

"It was postponed because the princess of Teuton said she was not in good shape due to her journey."

I wasn't impressed. She had been stuck in her carriage on the very first meeting, not even showing her nose, no matter how expensive it was.

"It doesn't matter," I said. I could only laugh as I thought about how much the Teutons ridiculed our kingdom.

"I tried to tell your Highness right away, but you were sleeping so well that I didn't want to wake you."

It was as Arwen said: I hadn't slept this deeply for a long time. Adelia's lullaby seemed to have worked.

"I will have to ask for it often in the future."

"What is your Highness talking about?"

"Oh- No, nothing," I answered roughly and got out of bed.

"So what are the negotiators doing?"

"They haven't done anything at all. It seems that the princess is in a very poor state. As I hear it, she's not usually healthy and had never been outside of her palace. Since she has traveled for more than a month across the ocean, her body must feel worn out."

"If her body is so weak, why not stay in her own country? Why come to foreign shores to do something that causes her discomfort?"

“Isn’t the tradition that the other side must also be present in the marriage?”

“Yet those guys have behaved so rudely ever since the first meeting.”

I was getting angry, and Arwen stared at me. I noticed she had something to say.

Only then I realize that Arwen might have a reason to wake me in the morning, so I asked, “Well? If you have anything to say, say it.”

“I dare to ask your Highness for something.”

“What?”

When I asked her what it was, she spoke with a face I had never seen on her before.

“Can we arrange a duel without being rude to the diplomats?”

Only then did I notice the aspiration that had entered Arwen’s eyes. It seemed that she resented being pushed back by the energy of foreign knights. On another occasion, I would have acceded to Arwen’s request, but not this time.

“Not possible.”

Arwen seemed confused about why I would refuse her, I who had arranged duels even on our imperial trip.

“Why? Is your Highness afraid that I’ll damage the honor of our kingdom?”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s because your turn won’t come.”

Arwen stared at me, trembling, after she heard my words. I didn’t know for sure, but if I had the same fire in my eyes as she did, it would’ve blazed brighter, not dimmer than hers. I was outraged beyond the point of resentment by yesterday’s events.

Just when we had driven the Empire out, unreasonable people dared appear in the center of the kingdom and show off their own form of tyranny. It was upsetting.

“He’s called the west’s best knight.”

Teuton’s strongest knight; number one in the west – I wagered that name would

mean little were he to face me.

“I’m going to tell him directly how useless a good reputation is. I believe his talent has made him become arrogant. After I show him how insignificant his talents are, he will become a bit more compliant,” I said, and a sad light shone in Arwen’s eyes.

“Wouldn’t things become difficult if your Highness calls him out?”

I would not take this opportunity to swear out loud, but I did plan to show my disagreement by way of words, which was unusual for me. I smiled at Arwen and shook my head.

“You don’t think Duncan is hoping for it as well?”

Arwen wasn’t the only one waiting for a chance to prove herself. Duncan Seymour Tudor had watched as his energy had disintegrated in my presence, and he was surely also sharpening his teeth.

“I bet that the same story will come from their camp soon enough.”

My prediction was not wrong.

A dinner had been prepared for everyone except the princess. Duncan Seymour Tudor, who had acted so arrogantly, stood up and started talking in a polite tone. The interpreter came forward and translated the Teutonic into Leonbergian.

“First of all, the Duke of Seymour, on behalf of Teuton, pays homage and congratulates Leonberg for its amazing victory. In addition, in order to create harmony between two kingdoms who had had little contact, he says that understanding each other is the first priority.”

“Briefly,” I commanded, and the interpreter flinched as he began summarizing the duke’s words.

“Just as the Kingdom of Leonberg was called the Kingdom of Knights in the past, so too was Teuton. The duke says that the fastest and best way to reach an understanding between knights is through a contest of swords.”

“I don’t think he spoke that long,” I mused, and the interpreter avoided my gaze with a cold sweat. I looked at Duncan Tudor, knowing that the arrogant knight had been

curter when he had talked. In all likelihood, the way he had said it was more as if he was deigning to offer me a big treat.

“Well, it doesn’t matter.”

Nothing was changed, this way or that way. Even if the interpreter had added one or two polite words, the nature of the message remained unchanged. In the end, it was a match of honor between the West and the North. Maximilian looked at me with a worried face. He even shot glances my way, urging me not to create useless trouble, to reject the offer in an appropriate manner. While I looked at Maximilian’s desperate eyes, I spoke.

“Tell him it’s a really good idea.”

Maximilian closed his eyes tightly.

This time, Teuton’s interpreter, sweating, explained my words to Duncan Seymour Tudor at length.

Duncan listened to the interpreter, who was adding all kinds of pleasant words I never said, and he looked at me and began laughing. I laughed at the same time as him. The interpreter then asked me what time the duel was to take place. Duncan had said he would follow my wishes.

“I want to hear what else he said. I know you got rid of some words.”

Teuton’s ambassador visibly fluttered as I said this, sweated some more, and told me the interpretation. And that is how the dinner went: We sat snarling at each other, revealing our teeth.

“Haah. Are these talks for an alliance, or are we in the process of declaring war?” Maximilian sighed, then lamented as he sat beside me.

“What Leonberg needs is comrades-at-arms,” I responded sagely. “We don’t want an arrogant neighbor who places our kingdom at their feet.”

“How about showing the dwarven weapons? According to your words, brother, their attitude will change after they see the weapons.”

“That’s only after I beat them down a notch.”

Showing them the armaments of the dwarves will not change their thoughts about the kingdom they belittled. At best, they will only treat us as a weak country lucky enough to acquire the craft of dwarves.

“And don’t worry too much. Isn’t there a saying that men are usually good friends after a fight?”

Of course, the common saying didn’t always hold true, and the current situation proved it.

The next day and the next, we merely growled at each other, and the atmosphere at the dinner table did not improve. It seemed that it never would – but it did.

The moment that the princess of Teuton, who had not dined with us due to ill health, finally attended dinner, the air that had become sharp in the dining hall melted away.

So easily, without leaving a trace of hostility… As if by magic.

CHAPTER 207
THE EMBERS IN THE FURNACE REMAIN THE SAME (5)

When it came to choosing the most beautiful woman in existence, Sigrun was first by far.

The elven race boasted of their absolute beauty. However, even among them, Sigrun was of the noblest of lineages and was so transcendent that all the tributes to beauty in the world would fail to compare to her allure.

Even if her evil and sadistic personality was a problem, there weren't many in existence who could match the majesty of her appearance.

To name a few: There was a Swordmaster in the era of the Great War, four hundred years ago, there was the White Night Mage, and in this age, there is Arwen Kirgayen.

Of course, their natural beauty was incomparable with Sigrun's, but each of them shone with a light that could never exist in the elf.

Agnes had possessed the dignity of a commander who had won numerous battles, possessing the fierce beauty that came along with the great honors she had achieved as a knight. Ophelia possessed the innate subtleness and mystical beauty derived from the truths she had grasped. And Arwen possessed a peculiar elegance and grace stemming from her bright and streamlined personality.

Compared to them, Teuton's princess was clearly lacking. When it came to her natural features and style, she fell far short of the absolutes that Sigrun embodied. Her dignity could not be compared to those who had wielded the sword. She could never come near the White Night Mage's delicate mystery, and her grace and elegance were lesser than Arwen's.

In terms of simple appearance, Teuton's princess did not reach that epitome that others had reached.

Nevertheless, when she appeared, everyone at the dinner table was dazzled.

Her face was pale as if no blood flowed through her veins and as if she would shed tears at any moment. Her body was slender, her shoulders looking so weak that she might fly away were the wind to blow.

If you saw her in a positive light, she would stimulate your protective instincts. If you looked at her with a critical eye, she looked sick. I was in the latter camp.

The other people seemed to have taken up the former reaction, however.

“I, the eldest daughter of the Tudor family, Hestia Neumann, apologizes to the members of the Leonberger family and the various nobles of the Leonberg Kingdom. I’m so sorry for causing concern,” the princess greeted everyone in awkward Leonbergian that, despite being fluent, was filled with empty words.

“Oh no!” Maximilian replied with unprecedented excitement, “I know that the ferocity and winds of the North Sea of Leonberg are not easy for those from other kingdoms to endure, so it is no fault of yours, princess. You don’t have to apologize.”

It seemed that Maximilian hadn’t even fully realized that Hestia had greeted us in Leonbergian.

Marshal Bielefeld didn’t act that different either. He looked at the princess with a face filled with extreme concern, as if looking at a granddaughter who was in ill health, and I almost laughed at him.

What did they see in the girl?

I looked around and noted that the other people had different facial expressions, but the emotions that existed within them were the same as those of Bielefeld and Maximilian – deep compassion and enthrallment.

The only man who acted as he usually acted was Siorin Kirgayen, who quietly looked at Princess Hestia, one end of his mouth curled up slightly as he tried to hide his sneer. It seemed that he was mentally comparing the appearance of his daughter with that of the princess. Siorin suddenly looked at me as if he felt my eyes upon him. His haughty gaze seemed to scream at me that Arwen was better than Hestia. Normally, I would have stuck my tongue out if I saw such an arrogant man, but I also did not rejoice over the current situation.

The men around the dinner table couldn't wake up from their daze, and there was no way that Teuton's envoys did not notice the atmosphere. A sheen of superiority came upon the face of Duncan Seymour Tudor. He smiled happily, and I found the expression rather despicable.

'Tuk Tuk Tuk~'

I deliberately rapped my knuckles on the table, hoping that the sound would dissipate the reigning atmosphere. Maximilian had been half-enthralled, almost fainting, up till then. He snapped awake and closed his mouth. Princess Hestia looked at me.

"I, Hestia Neumann, eldest daughter of the Tudor family, would like to say hello once again to the Crown Prince of the Leonberg Kingdom, who is the famous Lion of the North. You don't know how excited my heart becomes by meeting such a famous hero of the continent."

"Ahh…" Leonberg's people fawned over the strange smile on Hestia's lips as her eyes, which were already drooping, closed even further.

"Tchu."

As I clucked my tongue, Maximilian and the others realized their mistake and shut their mouths, correcting their expressions.

"I have always wanted to see the people of the Leonberg Kingdom at least once. The victory of your kingdom is a wonderful thing to hear of, even for a woman like me who knows nothing of war. So, I always wanted to hear these tales in detail. However, today I am blessed to be seated with several of the heroes who achieved such great things."

The diners' expressions became lax once more as soon as the princess tweeted like a bird and praised the kingdom's victory. It was a spectacle, especially Maximilian, whose comportment was the most spectacular of all as he spoke with Hestia.

"In fact, when we first declared our severance from the Empire, everyone on the continent laughed at us for being foolish. Everyone said that Leonberg would soon be trampled by imperial boots."

"The people of Leonberg's royal family who made that difficult decision are simply

wonderful and admirable."

"We did it because it was something we had to do. We did not do it to gain anyone's respect."

"So then it's even more respectful. There are a lot of people in the world who turn away from what they have to do at the first sign of struggle."

Maximilian became encouraged by the princess's words and kept talking about the path of thorns our kingdom had marched upon.

"Hmmhh," I coughed to caution Maximilian, but his gums didn't stop flapping. The man who tended to hide his heart like a ghost's seemed to have become a different person today. When I studied him, I saw he was even embarrassed; heat was starting to flicker upon his ears.

Perhaps Maximilian had fallen in love with the princess from Teuton at first sight.

It was something I couldn't understand. What's so special about a woman with a chronic illness?

Arwen was prettier, and more importantly, she was wise and strong. And it wasn't just her.

Gunn and her comrades might be half-elves, but they had inherited the blood of the faeries – and they were beautiful. And they, too, had more than enough skills to play a vital role on the battlefield.

In comparison, Princess Hestia of Teuton was just a sanatorium patient with a chronic illness.

It didn't make sense that Maximilian and the others couldn't snap awake as they looked at her. Leonberg was full of beautiful women who are adept in battle.

"Tcha," I clucked my tongue without realizing it, and the princess suddenly shifted her eyes as she looked at me.

"I see. It's amazing," she said, still facing Maximilian, whose mouth almost clapped as he spoke on and on. Hestia's eyes smiled at me without Maximilian noticing. As I looked at those bright eyes, I could not keep myself from laughing. The princess's

eyes blazed with greater intensity.

I didn't know why she was smiling so, and I could only chuckle at the sight. From that point on, I leaned back in my chair and began to stare at Hestia. The princess gently rolled her eyes away from me and looked at Maximilian again, who had been recounting sagas all the time.

The only problem was…

"My brother…"

"If it wasn't for my brother…"

"In fact, even when the uproar was so great in the north, my brother…"

"The Crown Prince…"

"My brother's…"

The saga Maximilian told of was not his but mine. It was absurd. Here was a guy who was bragging about his brother to a girl with whom he had fallen in love with at first sight.

"Maximilian."

"So, there was my brother- Yeah, brother? Please tell me."

"The food you have been served is cooling off."

He looked down at his meal and gently spoke to me.

"I didn't even notice it. Thank you for enlightening me, brother."

If Maximilian had been another guy, he would've felt bad to be faulted in front of a woman. But not Maximilian; instead of feeling bad, he looked at me with a respectful spirit, as if I had imparted some great truth to him.

"Now, let's eat before it cools more," Princess Hestia said with a sigh as she recommended the meal to everyone. I became passionate about eating, then. While I enjoyed my meal, I felt a strange gaze settle on me several times. When I looked up,

the princess from Teuton was staring at me. I blatantly met her gaze, and she returned to her meal of sesame seed cake, blushing.

But the appearance of her eating her meal didn't seem a wonderful sight to me; Hestia was a girl who did not possess any qualities I liked. I shook my head a little and then went back to eating. Even if I didn't like the Teutonic princess, I did like one thing – the fact that Duncan Seymour Tudor, who had been constantly scratching on my nerves, was silent. Thanks to this, I was able to leisurely finish my meal for the first time in a long while.

* * *

"No, brother! How can you say that?!"

When the dinner was done with, I called Maximilian over and asked if he liked Princess Hestia – and the guy jumped at the question.

"I do not desire to dare intervene with your marriage, brother!"

"Ah, I am not interested in marrying her. Meeting her in person today made it even clearer."

Maximilian tilted his head at my words. Then he asked how I couldn't like her since she looked great and possessed gentle sexuality.

"It's unreasonable. I don't think she could hold even a wooden sword properly. A flower that is merely nice to look at has no use to anyone. How can I love a woman who cannot protect herself?"

Maximilian thought about what I said and then asked me, "Brother, what do you think it means to have a spouse?"

I pondered on it before replying.

"Marriage must be between people who encourage each other, people who lead one another to greater growth, who recognize and trust each other's talents and character."

Maximilian's looked at me as if I had said something absurd.

“Is that a spouse, or a comrade?”

“If the person you will spend your entire life with is not your comrade, then what are they?” I asked, and Maximilian sighed.

“Brother, marriage is not an act akin to the recruitment of excellent knights.”

“What? Is it strange to wish that the person you will be with to have an excellent skill in one area?”

Maximilian opened and closed his mouth several times and finally emitted a deep sigh.

“Anyway, I have no intention of getting married, so if you like her that much, we can arrange your marriage. And I did notice that you like the princess very much.”

“Brother! When did I say that!”

“Are you shouting or not?” I said with a laugh, smirking, and Maximilian sighed again.

“If you do not wish to have Princess Hestia as your spouse, then what about Sir Arwen?” Maximilian asked me after a while in a weird tone of voice. “She is a proud champion of Leonberg, and her appearance and character are sublime enough to be classed as the best in the kingdom. And the Kirgayen family has been loyal to our family for generation after generation. No one can say that Sir Arwen lacks qualifications.”

I frowned.

“From what I’ve seen so far, she seems to have you on her mind, brother.”

“My relationship with her is not as you think it is, so stop being absurd.”

“Brother, you don’t seem to know her that well.”

It was ridiculous to hear such words from a foolish man who had boasted only of his brother in front of a woman he had fallen in love with.

“That’s it. Stop saying strange things. The meetings start in earnest tomorrow, so make sure to get some decent sleep.”

As I said this, Maximilian's expression became serious.

"I will prepare myself without a hitch."

"Make sure you do that. Now, I must rest as well."

Maximilian gave a small bow of his head as he heard my dismissal. When he grabbed the doorknob, he suddenly turned around and asked, "Brother, are you sure that you don't like Teuton's princess?"

"I will never love a woman who is constructed out of glass."

"Okay, brother. Then the negotiations will proceed with us using the armaments you brought from the north as bargaining chips, as previously mentioned," said Maximilian. He had suddenly returned to his usual bright self, and he left the room.

"Tchu. He should take the muffs from his ears and stop his pretense."

I had seen the slight sliver of relief that had passed over Maximilian's face, so I could only laugh.

'Dok Dok Dok~'

Then, someone knocked on the door.

"This is Siorin Kirgayen, your Highness."

"Come in."

When he opened the door, the handsome man stepped inside.

"I have a few things to discuss about tomorrow, so I am making a rude visit to your Highness at this late hour."

"If you think you're being rude, keep it short," I said, and Siorin did not so much as change his expression when faced with my impudence. Rather, he continued chatting.

"But before we talk about tomorrow, I would like to ask your Highness a question."

“What?”

“Is my daughter truly undesirable?”

I looked straight at Siorin. It seemed that he had overheard my conversation with Maximilian from outside. A fire was raging in the count’s eyes. After seeing that expression, I knew he wanted to know what kind of man I was, and how I dared to reject his daughter.

“Does your Highness understand that I talk about the daughter I had loved my entire life?” Siorin asked with a sincere smile, then continued on as his face became sorrowful.

“She is a child who has pledged her entire life to the sword. At this rate, after I leave this world, she will be alone for several decades, forever. With that in mind, I have to act out of love.”

“I don’t think Arwen will say she chose the life she lives because of her father’s love,” I said, stressing the fact that Arwen wasn’t a woman who was dependent on her father. Siorin looked sick as he heard me say it.

“That’s not what’s important now.” Siorin quickly regained his politeness, looked at me, and said, “No one can think about anything but your Highness’s marriage. If your Highness were to marry, she would not refuse.”

“Arwen?”

No one was asking the concerned parties about this supposed marriage; all they did was to make a fuss about Arwen and me.

“It seems that you don’t know your daughter, count. She doesn’t look at me in that way.”

“It seems rather that your Highness does not know the woman’s heart.”

“Everyone has been telling me that today.”

Maximilian had said it to me a while ago, and this time it was Siorin’s turn to utter the same sounds. The former statement was the ignorant view of a young man, but the latter was not. It came from a man who was once the desire of the kingdom’s

women, a man who was now prime minister.

He wasn't a man prone to spouting groundless bullshit.

"Hmm," Siorin mused in a polite yet powerful tone as he touched his chin for no apparent reason as if facing an unexpected situation.

"So, I'll ask your Highness again. Before answering, please note that the question is now a formal request from me as the head of the Kirgayen family to determine the will of the royal family," Siorin said, his posture pristine as he looked straight at me. "Going on the premise that your Highness is not marrying Princess Hestia Tudor, is your Highness willing to welcome Arwen in marriage?"

Siorin spoke, his face full of worry lines, as if forcing out words he didn't want to speak, but his eyes were as serious as ever.

What was this suddenly unfolding situation?

CHAPTER 208
THE EMBERS IN THE FURNACE REMAIN THE SAME (6)

Arwen was a very special person to me.

Firstly, she was the first talent in this world I had recognized. She was also the first knight who swore allegiance to me, even though things had started in a gritty and forced manner with us. Anyway, she was the type of person who brought strength to my heart when I thought of her.

The most trusted knight: This was Arwen Kirgayen. of course, it doesn't mean I didn't trust the other knights. I trusted Vincent and the warriors of Winter Castle and trusted Adelia as much as Arwen. They would never betray me; they would walk behind me at all times, even if the fires of hell awaited us at my road's end.

And that was the decisive difference between Arwen and the other knights.

When I walk toward the fires of hell, when everyone follows me without hesitation, Arwen will protect me from the front. Maybe she would tell me that my judgment was wrong, that it's the wrong way to talk of her, desperately try to persuade me.

But I am an immature entity who had lived a long life as a sword. I had already suffered due to many misjudgments, and there was no law that stated it would not happen again in the future. And when such a moment came, only Arwen would dare disagree with my judgment and put the brakes on. That's why I trust her the most. Her talents didn't even need mentioning. Already, her state was close to that of my departed uncle. It was only a few years ago when Arwen had only a single ring, and she is still in her mid-twenties.

It was an amazing growth rate, and I bet she would grow even greater than she was now. And she would reach ever higher, to the level that people call penta-chain.

I had been through a lot throughout my centuries of being a sword, yet I had never faced this emotion. Just imagining how Arwen would fight with the sword when she

became penta was enough to get my heart jumping. The blood flowing all over my body became hot, and I grabbed my flushed face. I forced myself to contain the laughter that threatened to leak from me.

“It looks like your Highness didn’t like it.”

While I was laughing within my pleasant imaginings, I suddenly heard Siorin’s voice.

“Well?”

After awaking from my thoughts, I realized why my imagination has dwelt on such sweet things. Siorin had asked me a question.

“I cannot glimpse into your Highness’s heart – this not answer enough,” Siorin cried out as he looked at me. What was he talking about? Peeking inside of me?

“I hope your Highness will give me a verbal answer.”

I frowned, and Siorin once more stressed the point.

“What do you think of Arwen?”

Having already cleared up my thoughts, I answered without hesitation.

“She is wiser and stronger than anyone I know. She’s a woman whose future I greatly look forward to.”

Siorin shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but that’s not the answer I want. I dare to ask again: Is your Highness willing to welcome her in marriage?”

His straightforward question again reminded me of Arwen. If she was a sword, she would be one of the best, with the straightest edge.

I thought about it for a while and then answered.

“I-”

‘Dok Dok Dok~’

Someone urgently knocked on the door.

“Your Highness! This is Arwen! Please excuse me for a moment.”

‘Dwak!’

Arwen would normally have waited quietly for permission to enter; she now appeared as he roughly opened the door.

“Your Highness, please forgive my rudeness.”

“There are so many rude people today.”

Arwen again apologized to me with a smile and turned to her father.

“We go out and talk.”

“I act as the head of the Kirgayen family. We are discussing critical affairs concerning his Highness and our family.”

It was on rare occasions that Siorin used his authority as head of the family in front of his daughter. His resistance didn’t last long.

“Do you really want me to abandon Kirgayen castle?”

Siorin’s expression collapsed as he heard his daughter’s single question.

“Today can end like that,” Arwen added. Arwen was in a position where she had to disobey her father and had taken the proper steps to intervene.

Arwen gave me a small nod of the head and then grabbed Siorin.

Siorin, a man with a strong appearance, was dragged out by his daughter. Even while he was being pulled from the room, Siorin formed words by shaping his mouth, seeming to say that he would hear my answer the next time, asking for a response by letter if I wasn’t sure yet.

He didn’t even realize that Arwen was watching his actions with a cold face.

Siorin was eventually forced out, and Arwen shot a glance at me, looked down, and

left the room.

The voice of a woman could be heard through the door.

‘Haven’t I said it before? If you speak of these things again, I won’t stay still.’

‘No- I’m thinking about you all the time-’

‘I hate to hear that. Why do you act like this in front of his Highness?’

‘Arwen, my daughter… Please give me a chance to explain.’

‘Please! I already know your explanation.’

‘So? I… ’

And after a while, their voices faded away.

“Hopefully, the entire matter will be dismissed.”

Arwen’s voice hadn’t been that cold when I had heard it, but I still worried about Siorin’s well-being.

“So it turns out that I have another discussion awaiting me tomorrow.”

Such words did I mumble before lying in my bed, thinking about Siorin, who had been dragged away without being able to complete his mission. Anyway, my discussion with him about the alliance with Teuton didn’t happen. If he had more to say, he would come back after his in-depth conversation with his daughter was over. With this in mind, I didn’t wait a moment longer and closed my eyes.

* * *

Siorin did not come to see me the next day. That was for one of two reasons: Either the business wasn’t that important, or Arwen’s anger was greater than expected.

I prepared my schedule for the day, hoping for the good health of the count who had faced his terrifying daughter.

‘Cheolkup~ Chulk~’

While I felt Adelia's gentle touch as she helped me put on my armor, I looked at the man kneeling in front of me.

"Your Highness," Montpellier greeted me while lying flat on his face.

His appearance was quite different from before. His body, which had once been rotund, had grown thin. I knew it was because Montpellier had been utterly convinced that he might die under the swords of those Leonberg nobles who resented him while I was away.

To Montpellier, I was both his shackle and his protector. In fact, when he met me again, he was overjoyed, as if reuniting with family. Of course, I didn't have the heart to care for Montpellier as if he was family. If you behave like a dog, you'll be treated like one.

"Montpellier, I will temporarily give you the title of honorary count. The title will be valid until the end of the negotiations with Teuton. The suspension of the title may be postponed or permanently withheld depending on the progress of today. If you achieve satisfactory results, you will also get a manor."

Montpellier's current position, with his title being meaningless, was as a lord without lands. Not so long ago, a marquis and ambassador of the Empire would have felt miserable when offered the title of count.

Montpellier's face changed at once when he heard my suggestion. Greed flashed in his excessively shiny eyes. His ass shook as if he would run to Teuton's envoys at once. Montpellier looked like a dog wagging its tail while looking at a bone with lots of fleshy bits still on it.

"I allow you to behave freely today."

I ordered him to harass Teuton this time, just as he had tormented Leonberg as imperial ambassador.

"Go and do as much as you can, and tear away as much from them as possible."

"I, Montpellier, Count of the Glorious Leonberg Kingdom, will enact your Highness's command with all my heart!"

After changing his title, the guy jumped up and headed to the conference hall.

“Well then. Let’s leave the negotiations to the penpushers, and let us, the blades, do the job of blades.”

I headed straight to the palace’s plaza. My knights were awaiting me there, Arwen included. Fully armed, she was as neat as always. I felt playful and almost asked Arwen to send Siorin my regards, but I kept my mouth shut because Arwen’s presence felt different than usual. She always looked me straight in the eyes but kept avoiding my gaze today for some reason. Her expression and actions were also awkward.

Arwen suddenly locked eyes with me, and I looked at her casually. I didn’t know what my face looked like.

“Hmmm.”

Bernardo Eli narrowed his eyes as he looked at Arwen and me.

“Perhaps,” he asked me, “Sir Arwen did something wrong?”

Of course, I had no intention of answering Eli’s useless questions, so I turned away from him.

“Strange. Sir Arwen is not one to do anything wrong.”

“Another useless word from you…” threatened Arwen as she stepped out, shutting the now-languishing Eli up. Quéon and the other knights giggled or laughed as they saw it. Carls became affronted and scolded the knights. However, no one listened to Carls.

Adelia constantly looked at my face, even if she said nothing. I was not offended at all, seeing the knights having a fun time in front of their Crown Prince. I got used to it at Winter Castle, so it was no longer a strange sight to see the knights talk so loudly before heading out. Rather, I was endeared by the noise they made, and I chuckled contentedly.

But I quickly straightened my face and told them, “Today, those who lose to the Teutons will be sent back to Winter Castle and will be stationed there for ten years. Take note of this.”

The knights didn’t even budge as they heard my statement. It looked like they didn’t

consider defeat. So I turned around, grinning a grin of satisfaction.

“Go.”

Adelia and Eli walked right behind me, while Carls was at my side. Arwen followed me from a distance. I paused and looked back at her.

“Arwen, your place is right next to me.”

She was amazed when she heard this and hurried to come to stand by my side.

“Keep your mind straight,” I said, thinking about her unusual appearance, and she looked at me. Her eyes looked a bit strange. I frowned, and she looked down.

“I was lax. Sorry, your Highness,” Arwen said as she took a small breath. I felt her energy gradually stabilize. It was only then that we began to move again to the royal palace’s training center, where the best knight in the west was waiting for me.

With every step I took, my energy was naturally released, and I felt that my dear knights were doing the same as if responding to me. It was as if we were heading into a great battle.

I looked back, and the knights laughed. I laughed with them, showing my teeth. I knew I wasn’t the only one whose mind was made sharp by the sudden fire within me that could not be resolved.

As I kept walking, I contained the heat that seemed as if it would burst from my body at any moment. And we finally arrived at the dojo of the royal palace, where the west’s number one knight awaited me.

‘Hwaaak!’

Duncan and the knights of Teuton welcomed us with a release of energy. I was so glad to feel that hostile atmosphere; it felt as if blood would be spilled right away.

I stopped and gave a wide grin.

CHAPTER 209
THE SWORD, THE ROSE, AND THE LION (1)

I walked to the center of the dojo, which was an open field surrounded by walls.

‘Schuck~’

I then came to a standstill in front of Duncan Seymour Tudor and raised my chin arrogantly. The duke’s eyes became sharp; he clearly did not like my attitude. I added greater momentum to my energy, and my skin began tingling. I wanted to laugh, seeing that my fierce energy was touching Duncan’s nerves once more. His face hardened, and at the same time, stormy energy began to rage around him.

It was the same energy I had felt when I had just returned from the north when the Duke had tried to strike fear into Leonberg’s knights. But this time was different, this time, it was directed towards me, and I was the Crown Prince of the kingdom.

To bare such energy in my presence was an act that went far beyond the line.

“The Duke of Teuton unleashes his energy and refuses to pay tribute to the Crown Prince of Leonberg!”

The palace knights who had arrived early and stood all round the dojo started screaming at once. Even if they spoke in Leonbergian, Duncan could surely understand the meaning of their cries.

Nevertheless, the duke did not lessen his energy, nor did he show any courtesy to me. He merely stood upright and looked at Leonberg’s knights.

“If you continue with this rudeness, we will consider it a grave affront!”

One hundred palace knights put their hands on their sword hilts and repeatedly warned the duke. Not only Duncan but also the Teutonic knights did not soften their energy at all. The palace knights gave no further warnings.

‘Sheeek!’

They drew their swords without hesitation and advanced upon Teuton's knights. Hundreds of palace guards appeared on the walls surrounding the training field, aiming their bows.

"This the royal palace, home of the monarchs of the Leonberg Kingdom! Anyone who will not pay homage to the Crown Prince is not entitled to be here!"

"From this point on, we will disarm you according to protocol!"

Even as Teuton's knights heard the palace knights' sharp cries, they did not show the least bit of agitation. It was common practice to compete with energy before contests, so it seemed that the Teutons thought that the palace knights' aggressive actions were merely done to defeat their spirits. But the palace knights were not playing some trick or doing anything wrong.

After the loss of the queen during the imperial siege, the palace knights had become sharper. They were prepared to cut down anything and anyone that threatened the royal family's dignity and safety – even if their opponents were the Rosethorn knights and the best knight in the west, famous across the continent.

As the palace knights began to advance with their swords and shields, a slight flurry of movement spread through Teuton's knights. Duncan Seymour Tudor frowned at me.

His eyes seemed to ask me why I was making such a big deal as if he was urging me to restrain the palace knights. I snorted. Why would I hold them back? They were just doing their job.

If there was something wrong, then it was the Teutons who ignored Leonberg's dignity and acted as they willed.

'Shuck~ shuck~'

I did nothing, and the palace knights kept advancing on the Teutons, step by step. And they finally reached the front of the Teutonic knights, at such a distance that they could strike them if they swung their swords. If things went on like this, the Teutons would suffer the shame of being disarmed by knights from another country.

'Sheeek!'

The Rosethorn knights could bear the pressure no more and drew their swords, all at once. Throw away your swords; obey the instructions – the palace knights shouted no warnings. They instead quietly channeled their mana to the edges of their blades and prepared for battle.

The atmosphere was tense, bloody, making me feel as if swords would clash right away.

'Shh~'

Duncan Seymour Tudor raised his hand. The energy that had risen from the Rosethorn knights and Duncan himself quickly dissipated into nothingness.

'Cheoulkup~'

Teuton's knights sheathed their swords at once and took up their stationary positions again. Duncan alternated his gaze between my knights and the palace knights with a hard face and then turned to me.

"Would you like a war?" he asked me coldly – in fluent Leonbergian.

"What? You can speak?"

I had thought he was arrogant; now I knew he was also deceptive.

"I asked if your kingdom wishes to be hostile to Teuton," Duncan asked again instead of answering my words.

"Isn't that what you want, Duke Seymour? I can only see your arrogant behavior in the heart of Leonberg as a deliberate provocation."

"Do you truly think so?" Slight ridicule appeared in his eyes. Duncan's eyes seemed to say that just because we were a kingdom didn't mean that we had the same character as Teuton.

"Hahaha," I laughed – a mad burst of laughter that made me bend at the waist.

"Wow! You're driving me crazy."

Duncan frowned at my sudden laughter.

“What is so funny?”

I chuckled for a while and answered him.

“One kingdom meets a kingdom that has forgotten the glory of its past and was about to perish. Meanwhile, the other kingdom meets one which is drunk on the glory of their past and does not know what happens in the present. Is there anything more complicated than this?”

The arrogant duke frowned. It seemed that he had realized that ‘the kingdom drunk on its past which does not know how to look forward’ referred to Teuton.

“I asked if you wanted a war,” Duncan asked, blatant provocation in his eyes.

“Before I answer that question, I will ask one of my own.”

Whether he accepted this or not, I kept talking.

“Leonberg has proven itself by winning the war against the Empire. What does Teuton have to prove its might, other than your old reputation as being the great power of the west? What I am asking is: Does Teuton deserve to be in alliance with Leonberg?”

The duke replied with a cold face, still openly ridiculing me.

“If the Empire was not engulfed in a civil war, you would not be in a position to be boasting. You would have been wiped out, as weak as you are.”

I laughed coldly as the duke revealed his true intentions.

“That is Teuton’s answer,” I noted and called a palace knight over to me.

“Yes, your Highness?”

“Go and tell Montpellier and Count Kirgayen,” I ordered while locking my gaze with Duncan’s, “to stop negotiations right away. There is no need for an alliance.”

The moment I was done speaking, the atmosphere of the dojo had become frozen. I enjoyed watching Duncan, Teuton’s handsome Duke. He still couldn’t figure it out. I could see he firmly believed I was bluffing just to break Teuton’s spirit and probably

thought that I would rescind my order at any moment. I had no intention of doing so.

“Everything will be done according to your Highness’s will,” the palace knight said and left the training grounds.

“Now, this is my answer to your question,” I told Duncan, who had remained stiff until then. I could see the suspicion grow in him that it was too late for him to change my mind. I relaxed and appreciated the moment when his suspicion turned into embarrassment.

“You are quite prestigious in your home country. Your authority as envoy is great, and so you hope to overturn our negotiations arbitrarily,” I said in a cold tone.

“Your Highness’s words are not correct,” a woman’s voice spoke up from behind me.

“The Duke of Seymour certainly does not have the authority to end our negotiations.”

The voice was soft, as if whispering, yet quite powerful. I turned around.

“Because I, Hestia Neumann Tudor, is in charge of this delegation.”

And there stood Teuton’s princess, Hestia Neumann Tudor.

“Duke Seymour. If you have done something wrong, it is only right that you apologize.”

She still had the same slender figure that would fly away were the wind to pick up, but Hestia had a different bearing than yesterday when she had only looked weak.

“Please forgive the rudeness.” Duncan Seymour Tudor bowed his head.

The change in his attitude was so dramatic that it bordered on the absurd.

“A sincere apology has been given to the offended party. I believe the duke’s repentance has been fully conveyed to his Highness the Crown Prince,” Princess Hestia said as she looked at me, her voice as soft as that of a child’s. But the nature of her gaze really blew my mind, as if she was telling me: “All you really wanted was the duke’s apology.”

There no longer existed the princess who did not know the world; there was only an

insidious woman who might be hatching a hundred plans. Princess Hestia glanced at me while Duncan Seymour Tudor quietly stood behind her – as it had been his natural place from the beginning. I watched them without being disturbed, as I already knew: Hestia Neumann Tudor, Princess of Teuton, was the real authority of their delegation.

“I will accept the apology,” I said as I waved my hand.

‘shuuck~’

The palace knights who had surrounded the Teutons withdrew at once, and the archers who had filled the walls disappeared. The princess squinted and laughed. She seemed very pleased with my quick decision.

“Of course, a single word will not make the anger of my other knights disappear so easily.”

My words stiffened Hestia’s smile.

“The excess emotions will be resolved by a contest of swords.”

I glanced at the princess and then spoke to the Duke of Seymour.

“Now that nothing else distracts us, let’s start.”

* * *

Knights from both sides stood face to face, with the training ring in the middle. It was some time since the energy of the knights who had stood up against us had been released, but the tension grew ever greater.

Meanwhile, Duncan glanced at me and asked how we would proceed with the contest.

“It can be done as a group,” he suggested, “or one against one. The format doesn’t matter. Teuton will follow with whatever you decide.”

Concessions are given by those who hold the firm belief that they have the upper hand, and I could see Duncan thought that Teuton was the strongest. I did not want to waste any more time.

“Then we will do it one versus one, but the victor will continue fighting in the next battle.”

“How many will you choose?” Duncan asked, and I chuckled. Leonberg’s knights have been sending eager glances my way for a while now, hoping that they would be the ones to enter the ring.

Their gazes were so hot that it felt as if my back was heating up. I wasn’t sure, but I guessed that those who didn’t get a chance would hold it against me forever. I didn’t want to give Leonberg’s knights a reason to resentment me.

“We have this entire place prepared. It’ll be no fun if only a few people compete.”

“Then-”

“We fight until either side concedes defeat, or until they have none left who can compete. In that way, no one will be left out.”

A small cheer erupted from behind my back. My knights had been fighting like dogs, struggling on both the northern and southern fronts. Now they were quartered in the royal palace and told to behave themselves. They were quite frustrated and bored, so I understood their enthusiasm.

“I will go first.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I’ll be first.”

When I turned around, I saw Leonberg’s knights bickering with each other.

Quéon had stated that he had to go first due to his position as commander of the Black Lancers. Eli and Arwen laughed as they interjected themselves into the discussion, saying that there were countless reasons for them to go first. There was no greater mess than this.

“It’s like they’re different persons just because they want to fight,” Eli suddenly told me, acting as if it was absurd.

“You’re one to talk,” I replied, knowing that Eli was just like them.

While they bickered like that, I heard the duke’s voice.

“Aren’t Leonberg’s knights ready yet?”

Unlike my knights, the duke’s were quietly waiting for him to call them by name. Their discipline was admirable, and it was something to be imitated.

“From now on, I’ll send whoever talks out last.”

And that was how I immediately made Leonberg’s knights follow the Teuton example.

“I believe both sides will try their best to compete and show their skill without breaking the harmony between our two countries.”

I laughed as I heard the princess’s words, who had appointed herself as the referee. There had never been harmony in the first place, but there was certainly something that could be broken down – Teuton’s bloated pride, and maybe a few heads.

“The victor shows goodwill to the defeated, and the loser honors the winner. I hope that there will be no unnecessary casualties. Even if your eyes are on your opponent’s sword, always keep mercy in your heart and hands.”

Princess Hestia stated that the combatants had to be attentive so that the contest did not overheat, with ill will being bred between the contenders. But what could I do? Contrary to the princess, I didn’t want this contest to be a boring affair.

So, just when Hestia was about to announce the start of the battles, I stepped forward and said, “If you desire a reward, then this will excite you.”

I was holding a dwarven sword forged by the meisters.

“Huah!”

The Rosethorn knights had been standing still, waiting for the contest to start; they all now took a collective gasp – even the handsome Duncan Seymour Tudor. Their fighting spirit had become a bit softened after the princess had talked for such a long time.

“I will give this sword to the knight who gains the most victories today.”

That fighting spirit now burned like fire, strong enough to rub off on Leonberg’s

knights.

“Then, let’s start,” I said on behalf of Princess Hestia, who had forgotten her role while she had glanced at me, shocked. My performance had a terrifying effect. The Rosethorn knights had been quietly waiting a while ago. They now begged the duke to be chosen first.

“Call your first,” I said.

Duncan glanced at me and then called a knight.

“John Stewart.”

The Rosethorn knight who eagerly stepped forward had a very strong physique.

“Your Highness, first of all…”

“Me first!”

Leonberg’s knights were clamoring to be called out first.

“It’s too late,” I told them and pointed to the ring. While the other knights had quarreled, someone had already made their way to the center of the dojo. It was Eli.

Quéon booed, and the other knights joined him.

“I am Bernardo Eli. I am the eldest son of Count Eli, the leader of the Knights of Dawn, and Leonberg’s champion who had cut down countless knights in our war against the Empire.”

Whether they wanted to hear it or not, Bernardo Eli introduced himself grandiosely to Teuton’s knights.

“The victor shows goodwill to the defeated, and the loser honors the winner,” the princess of Teuton, who had only then snapped awake, announced the start of the contest.

And- ‘Klang~’ ‘Kududuk~’

John Stewart of the Rosethorn Knights rolled over the floor, without having landed a

strike.

Duncan Seymour Tudor's expression stiffened, and the Rosethorn Knights who had watched the duel were also looked shocked.

"Next!" Eli shouted, his chin raised arrogantly, and his Aura Blade still blazing.

It was the first time I had ever liked Bernardo Eli.

CHAPTER 210
THE SWORD, THE ROSE, AND THE LION (2)

“No!” Another Rosethorn knight screamed as he fell under Eli’s smooth assault.

“Ooh—oh-oh!” Bernardo Eli roared in victory as he stood before his defeated foe.

He showed no such thing as proper consideration toward the other person. I would have frowned under other circumstances, but not this time around.

Duncan Seymour Tudor was staring at the training ring with a rock-solid expression. The Rosethorn knights who had maintained a solid energy looked at their fallen comrade with hard eyes and closed mouths. They showed no emotion to Eli’s satisfaction. Duncan briefly glanced at Eli before calling up another knight.

‘Dwak!’

“Third down!”

Bernardo Eli also bested him.

“Who’s next?!”

The Rosethorn Knights’ faces now became distorted as they heard Eli cry out loud, his shoulders raised. The duke sent forth another knight. Unlike his comrades, who had all fallen to Eli’s first blow, this knight was quite competent. It was only after ten strikes that he couldn’t withstand the assault any more and rolled to the floor.

“That’s four! I am the Master who will receive the sword from his Highness!”

“Boo! Boo!”

Boos poured out from Leonberg’s knights towards Eli. The Rosethorn knights remained silent, their mouths shut. It was an absurd sight, so I looked back to my knights.

“To go into the ring on his own, without discussion! If you feel sorry for your mistake, Eli, then come out of there by yourself!”

“Where’s the honor in a stolen victory!”

The kingdom’s knights were spouting abuse and curses at Eli.

It seemed that they didn’t like Eli’s actions, who had entered the ring while they were still busy setting their order. They should’ve known how bad Eli’s behavior usually was, and he was still the same man.

“I am after Bernardo Eli.”

“Who said that?”

There were even those who were already deciding who was next in line, anticipating Eli’s defeat, who was standing still.

It was ridiculous. I was used to it but thought that it had to be weird for the Teutons. Duncan Seymour’s Face was completely twisted. It seemed that he thought the knights of Leonberg were insulting those of Teuton. I could have gone to the duke and told him: ‘It’s just a misunderstanding. These guys just don’t like it if someone reduces their chances of fighting and scoring wins.’

But I didn’t. It was a pleasure for me to see the duke’s furious face. Duncan called a knight to him and then quietly said a few short words to the man. The knight nodded and stepped into the ring. Even after seeing four of his comrades beaten to the floor in such a miserable manner, he didn’t hesitate in his steps.

It was natural; just as Eli was a Master, so was this knight. And he was a Master who had reached completion through the use of mana rings, which were antithetical to the mana heart.

“I am Gerhard Butland,” Teuton’s Master introduced himself by name.

“Bernardo Eli is the name of the knight that will defeat you.”

Eli was so excited that he couldn’t even notice that Gerhard was a Master, and he greeted his foe with absolute arrogance. That was likely to get his nose broken.

Although Eli's behavior was nasty, I didn't want the Teutons to smash us, so I called out to warn him. At least, I would've done so if I hadn't seen his eyes. Eli's eyes were burning with a calm intensity.

"How long will you endure? I don't think you'll last long," Eli taunted with a frivolous face, his eyes as calm as before. He seemed to have an idea. To rebuild the Eli family, he had been cunning enough to exploit the sons of other noble families. Eli had surely expected there to be a Master among the Rosethorn Knights, one of the strongest orders on the continent.

I waited patiently, wanting to see the number of tricks prepared by the clever Eli.

'Klang! Klank! Klang!'

A series of blows followed one after another as Aura Blades cleaved through the air.

'Schp~'

Eli's face, always relaxed, was wracked with pain. His Aura Blade, which still shined brightly, began to shake sporadically.

'Klang!'

On the other hand, Gerhard's face continued to show no expression. Eli's situation was such because the unique waves of the mana rings had destroyed the mana flowing from Eli's heart. I had been convinced up till then that Eli had a number of tricks up his sleeve, but it was not so. He was facing the Teutonic Master with pure swordsmanship, without schemes.

Truly, it was strength versus strength and Aura Blade versus Aura Blade, a clean fight.

In terms of swordsmanship, Eli was clearly superior.

His opponent had refined his skill repeatedly, but the Eli family's style – a family once called the greatest family of knights in Leonberg – was superior to that of the Rosethorn knight.

Nevertheless, Teuton's knight had the upper hand. But I knew that Eli, who hadn't stepped back until now, was on the verge of using it. Even as I watched Bernardo Eli

struggle with the Teutonic Master, I did not step forward. He would not back down; his mana heart was not trash.

I wasn't wrong. Through the power of [Third Ear], I could hear Eli's constant repetition.

Bernardo Eli wasn't here for a mere victory. His family had fallen because they had persisted in the use of mana hearts, and this was a world wherein the Eli family was foolishly laughed at and mocked. Eli had entered the ring to say goodbye to all of that.

"Ji!" Eli exclaimed as he channeled mana from his heart into his sword.

'Kdang! kdang!'

Ethereal Aura Blade fragments fluttered in the air – all of them split from Eli's sword.

Gerhard's energy began to surge. It was clear that Eli was going to go all-in at this point, without thinking about the long game, about being ready for the next battle.

Teuton's Master suddenly launched an unprecedented and powerful strike.

'Klang! Klang!'

With each clash of swords, Eli's Aura Blade was winnowed down.

"I am the best sword in the kingdom!" Eli shouted, shaking as he spewed blood from his mouth. Another strike cleaved through the air, and…

'Dla~ Dla~'

A great crack formed on Eli's Aura Blade, and it shattered. Eli looked at his sword, its radiant light gone.

"…!" Teuton's Master shouted something and raised his sword.

"I am Bernardo Eli, the successor of the ancient Eli family!"

Eli had looked at his sword blankly for the briefest of moments. He then fixed it in both his hands and twisted his stance at the waist.

“In the dark, moonlit night”

“Rust upon my sword shined blue”

Eli quietly recited verses.

“Under a pale moon do I scrape away the rust”

“And sharpen my sword for when the wolf howls”

A subtle light shone in place of Eli’s shattered Aura Blade. And that was the moment when Gerhard sliced down with his sword.

‘Bwang!’

I got up from my seat.

‘Dump～’

Teuton’s Master knelt – with a sword cut through in half in his hand. And before him was Bernardo Eli, who still stood. Although trembling and with a blood-covered body, he remained on his two feet.

Eli looked at me.

“I am Bernardo Eli.”

As I heard him speak, I instinctively clenched my fist.

Even in this age, when mana from the heart has been dismissed as a mercenary or low-level skill, Eli had persisted in the vision of his fallen family. His successive victories was a sign of the resurrection of his family. It was a declaration that the Knights of the Heart, who had been oppressed by the Knights of the Ring, have returned to the world.

It was the resurgence of ancient glory.

My heart pounded.

Teuton’s Master, who was kneeling, slowly tilted to the side and collapsed

completely.

‘Wssch~’

Eli spasmed and slowly slumped down.

‘Shin~’

I caught the crumbling guy’s body.

“My- I did it, your Highness.”

The man in my arms laughed, and as usual, it was a frivolous and disgusting laugh.

“Good work, Bernardo.”

Eli’s eyes stretched wide as he heard my words.

“Why did you call me on my first name? You never did that.”

Instead of answering, I quietly embraced him and turned around.

“Oh, Sir Arwen should have seen the scene, I win-”

The guy muttering bullshit in my arms closed his eyes, unable to finish his sentence, and fell completely unconscious. I glanced at the princess who stood on the edge of the dojo.

“Both contestants have fallen unconscious, but I declare that the one who has held on to the end, Bernardo Eli, knight of the Leonberg Kingdom, has won.”

The princess, who seemed devastated, declared Eli’s victory.

“Sir Eli is the best!”

“Champion of the kingdom!”

“Bernardo Eli!”

Leonberg’s knights cheered the man who they had jeered at only a while ago. I gave a

happy chuckle. When I got back to my seat, the waiting court wizard accepted Eli from me.

“He fainted and should let himself heal for a time, but fortunately, there are no major wounds,” the wizard reported.

“Must be because he’s such a strong guy.”

The palace knights helped the wizard to carry Eli away. In the meantime, I looked at the knights from the Kingdom of Teuton. Their Master had already been carried away, and the remaining Rosethorn Knights seemed half-mad after Gerhard’s shocking defeat. On our side reigned a festive atmosphere; on theirs, the atmosphere was that of a mortuary.

It was the picture I wanted to see, and a scene that I really liked. However, the contest had just begun. Teuton’s knights had become incensed by their successive defeats and stared at our side. Leonberg’s knights stared back, their energy having risen after Eli’s victory. Duke Seymour looked our way with a withering glance.

The arrogance of looking down upon our kingdom and acting as if he had placed Leonberg’s knights under his feet could no longer to be seen. As I matched his sharp gaze, the corners of my mouth curled up. With this, I straightened my expression. The party had just begun. The real deal would start from now on.

“Next to go up is-”

Before I could finish speaking, there was a man who jumped into the ring like a blast, like a flash. He was a one-eyed knight who wielded a black spear. It was Quéon Lichtheim, commander of the Black Lancers. He learned bad habits quickly; it seemed. I laughed as I watched the dojo.

Teuton’s knight entered the ring after Quéon and introduced himself – And the duel began.

Victories followed defeats, and swords from both kingdoms clashed countless times. Twilight came like a heavy black spider, and the palace knights surrounded the ring with torches. Knights from both countries constantly met one another’s swords in the ring. The day was completely over, with the sky glowing with the sun’s last red rays. The ground was littered with pieces of iron and splattered with the blood of knights. Nobody came to clean the dojo up, a factor that added to the heated

atmosphere that reigned on both sides.

“Next!”

“…!”

The dueling knights faced each other without rest. Meanwhile, most of the people residing in the royal palace had flocked to the dojo. There were those of direct Leonberger lineage, Maximilian included. The Great Marshal, Montpellier, and Siorin came as well.

“Your Highness.”

“What can you tell me about the meeting?” I asked Siorin while my eyes tracked the knights’ battle.

“We stopped at your Highness’s command.”

“How much did you gain?”

It turned out that no profit had come from the interrupted talks, though.

“We found out that Teuton does not want an equal alliance, but is rather forming an anti-imperial alliance centered on their kingdom. From their attitude, it seems that some countries have already accepted Teuton’s proposal.”

“So they want to play the big game and imitate the Empire?”

Siorin nodded.

“And Montpellier…” Siorin said as if just remembering.

“What about Montpellier?”

“I still wonder if he is the right person for this job.”

Leonberg’s knight was on the verge of ending his opponent, so I turned to look at Siorin, who was looking at me with a stern face.

“Even if your Highness has entrusted him with the duty to negotiate with the

Teutons, it would be wise to exclude him from proceedings, even now. The process was delayed because of him tying it down, quibbling over minor details, or demanding far too much."

"Why do you think I sent him there?"

"Yes, your Highness?"

"In truth, I wanted Montpellier to turn the negotiations upside down."

Siorin's face contorted as he heard my words.

"Of course, I didn't get him to obstruct the Teutons without reason."

After saying that, I called Montpellier to me with a gesture, and he came from afar. He explained himself.

"Since your Highness was to compete against Teuton's knights in a contest of swords, I thought it would be easier to proceed with negotiations after the proper results here were achieved. If we strike them hard once… No, they won't be able to act so arrogantly after they step away from a defeat."

"That's right, Montpellier."

Siorin sighed at me. It seemed that he was not happy with the actions of Montpellier and me and the way we were conducting diplomatic talks. Still, Siorin didn't dare disagree with me. He just gave a deeper, more complete sigh.

Siorin's attitude changed the moment when Arwen climbed into the ring and started competing with a Teutonic Master. It seemed as if he was going to rush in and punch the Teutonic knight who had scratched his precious daughter's body and started treating the Teutons as enemies.

It was Arwen who won, and the wound on her body was but a scratch. Teuton's Master, who had faced her, had a gash in his stomach and across his shoulders, and he fell straight down. Siorin's daughter remained undefeated. Or maybe not…

"It's coming to an end."

I again began to focus on the battles between the knights.

CHAPTER 211
THE SWORD, THE ROSE, AND THE LION (3)

Only four knights of Teuton stood intact and unwounded. Those who had been seriously injured were carried out on stretchers, while those with light injuries remained at the dojo, having only simple first aid applied to their wounds as they watched the contest reach its end.

Of those Teutons who had been defeated, only half had stepped away with minor injuries. The faces of the forty-seven Teutonic knights who observed the duels looked terrible as if they had suffered great insult. Leonberg had more than thirty knights left who were fighting-fit compared to Teuton's four. The knights of our kingdom who remained in the dojo were a hundred, the original number that had entered. Even a knight whose forearm was severed remained to watch the contest after receiving the attentions of the court wizard.

The appearance of Leonberg's knights stood in stark contrast to Teuton's. It was the difference between knights who had arrived at the palace after fighting countless wars and those knights who had honed their skills by swinging swords in a gym.

The duke from Teuton must have realized it by now. I knew the Rosethorn knights were just like plants grown in a well-kept garden. No matter how sharp the thorns of the roses were, one could never compare them to the canine teeth of fierce wolves.

I laughed a little – it was so much fun! I was enticed by the fact that the contest had not yet ended and the fact that the most delicious meal still remained to be savored.

"Stop it!"

While I was admiring Duncan's expression, there came a disturbance.

"We have clearly stated, repeatedly, that the purpose of this contest is to form unity between our two countries!" cried Princess Hestia. "I don't understand why Leonberg's knights enter these duels with murderous intent – as if meeting their lifelong enemies!"

While I listened to the princess complain about our behavior, something suddenly caught my eye within the dojo. There was a woman who wore a coat of blood – Adelia, whose eyes emitted different rays of light. And before her was a Teutonic Master. Both contestants were equally bloody, but one was covered in his own blood while the other was covered in her foe's.

"When did he go up again!" I shouted in disgust, as they were obviously trying to force Adelia out. Duncan Seymour Tudor stepped out and spoke.

"Why can't a wounded person reenter a contest between knights? Well, it is a matter of course. So I, Duncan Seymour Tudor, head of the Rosethorn Knights and Duke of Teuton, have no intention of raising any objection."

"Duke!" the princess cried out, frowned, and tried to say something, but the duke spoke first with an absolutely wrathful expression.

"If you don't want Teuton's knights to be known as battle-fearing cowards, then this must be done."

The expression and tone of Duncan, as well as his fierce gaze, made it clear that there was no room for compromise. The princess shut her mouth, her face stern. After the duke had beaten back the princess, he glanced at Adelia and then looked at me.

"I will continue the duel." What came into his eyes was obvious anger, murder.

"I, Duncan Seymour Tudor, Duke of Seymour, head of the Rosethorn Knights, will enter battle with Leonberg's knights."

As the duke said this, he drew his sword and entered the ring. Adelia reacted to the destructive energy flowing from Duncan's sword.

"Adelia!" I shouted to her, knowing she was about to run wild. But it was too late.

'Shiip~'

Duncan Seymour Tudor's sword cleaved into Adelia, cutting her diagonally from one side's shoulder to the other side's waist, and she collapsed to the ground in mid-charge. The duke raised his sword again. That blue flash of light was flying toward Adelia's back, who has crouching with both her hands on the ground. I was already running, just managing to protect Adelia's front as I drew my sword.

‘Bwang!’

The light upon Duncan’s sword faded out as he stayed his blade.

“What are you doing? The contest hasn’t finished yet. There are three knights left.”

Instead of answering Duncan, I hugged Adelia.

“Adelia?”

The light that had shone in her eyes returned, and she touched her lips. However, it wasn’t words that flowed past her teeth but a handful of blood.

“Don’t- Don’t say anything.”

As she heard my words, Adelia tried to speak several times, then closed her eyes. Her body felt limp in my arms.

“Where is the wizard?”

“Yes, your Highness!”

“Save her. If she doesn’t make it, I won’t forgive you.”

The court wizard rushed out and took Adelia, gently pulling her from the ring. He began to pour out his healing magic. I couldn’t look at it anymore, so I turned toward Duncan Seymour Tudor.

“This is shameful, it is terrible. A third party never intervenes in duels, which are sacred. Is there a greater insult than this?”

There remained a sense of superiority in Duncan’s eyes. He laughed, and it came out dry.

“Very well. I admit my fault.”

Rather than readying his sword, which he had so eagerly swung towards Adelia’s back, Duncan apologized. He added that Adelia wanted to keep fighting anyway, and it wasn’t unreasonable for him to attack an opponent who didn’t let go of her sword.

“You did wrong. That’s easy to say,” I told the devious duke in a soft tone.

“I have a single suggestion to make on the matter of correcting your fault.”

Duncan’s eyes lit up as he heard my words.

“We will end this contest with a single win, regardless of the number of wins gained by either side.”

“That means-”

“It means that if you defeat me, the contest will end with Teuton as the victor. The sword will also be Teuton’s.”

Duncan Seymour Tudor laughed and said, “Then, please, let me apologize properly.”

So, the arrogant duke took up his sword and pointed it at me.

And I…

“I cut the scales of a dragon that cannot be cut by any sword, and drink its hot blood.”

From my stance, I slashed my sword from left to right.

‘Karreaul,’ Twilight cried.

‘Shkrsoo~’

The duke’s sword was sliced clean through in quick order. The arrogant man stretched his eyes wide, and there was amazement within them. Twilight unerringly flew at the duke’s neck.

‘Quap~’

I twisted my grip at the last moment.

‘Bang!’

Twilight missed its target and smashed into the training ring, scattering dirt and stone dust.

“You died once.”

I smiled coldly and stepped back.

“Again,” I said.

The duke had been staring at my sword blankly; he snapped awake and shouted, “…!”

One of Teuton’s knights handed him a well-forged longsword, and Duncan gripped it with both hands.

Then he took in his stance, his eyes filled with caution.

‘Wshik~’

I again thrust my sword at the duke, and its blade touched his chest. Duncan looked at me, frowning.

“You died twice.”

The duel commenced once more, and Twilight touched the duke’s body several times – on the chest, neck, belly, groin, and head. All the vital places where a wound would be deadly.

“You have died eleven deaths.”

Duke Seymour died countless times by my sword, even if not a single tear came upon his fabric.

“What are you trying to achieve by doing this?” Duncan Seymour Tudor growled while looking at me.

I coldly laughed as I looked at his face, which was a mess of shame and anger. I had to do it. This man of Teuton had seriously hurt my precious knight. The duke’s lips trembled, and he could not hide his humiliation. Then, he corrected his posture and raised his energy, and the unique presence of a knight who had reached the highest stage spread everywhere. I took the duke’s energy in stride by marshaling my own and felt that he was still scattered.

“Again,” I urged.

“Ahhh!” Duncan cried like a beast and rushed toward me.

And again died a woundless death.

“Again!”

The duke died, died, and died some more.

Shame and anger; little by little, these emotions faded from Duncan’s eyes. A completely new emotion took control of his mind: Fear. I looked into his trembling eyes and continued to wield Twilight.

“You have died sixty-seven times.”

The fear in the duke’s eyes began to fade and also disappeared before long.

Then- “The eighty-fifth!”

When I raised my sword to deliver death number eighty-six, the duke stopped showing any reaction to my strikes. He was just looking at me with empty eyes. And as he stared with those dead eyes, his sword hung limply by his side.

“Princess.”

The princess, who was completely enchanted, turned to me in amazement.

Number One Knight in the West, Teuton’s Strongest Knight – it seemed that the Teutons had not yet awakened to the reality of the disastrous defeat suffered by the handsome duke.

“Tchu. Do you want me to continue? If not, say something,” I said in a frigid tone to Princess Hestia, whose face was still blank. When I glanced at the few Rosethorn Knights who had not yet fought, they trembled. Only then did the princess manage to open her mouth with a stutter.

“Oh- He lost… We lost…”

I turned back and watched Hestia repeatedly declaring Teuton’s defeat, forgetting the referee’s duty to maintain neutrality.

“I admit to Teuton’s defeat!” the princess finally exclaimed in a shaking voice. My back was already turned on her as I returned to my seat. The knights of Leonberg were looking at me – with a spirit of profound respect.

As I looked at the pride on their faces, my heart itself became proud of them. But I didn’t dare express myself, so I raised my chin as I gazed at my knights – being terribly arrogant.

“Your Highness.”

Arwen, whose arm and shoulders wound were bandaged, bowed her head to me and expressed her unparalleled respect.

“He’s a real monster,” Bernardo Eli, who had made sure his wounds were healed in a hurry, muttered to himself with an awe-filled face.

“Brother.”

Maximilian looked at me in a very affectionate manner. Even though we had spoken many times as brothers, no words needed to be said when our eyes met. I merely saw him, and he saw me. Quéon and the other knights of Leonberg looked at me and took to shouting.

“A homage to another victory from the Crown Prince!”

“Long live the prince!”

“Long live the Leonberger royal family! Long live the Leonberg Kingdom!”

I remained silent as I listened to their cheers – and then saw Adelia.

The court wizard nodded to me and said she had passed the stage of emergency. If Adelia healed well, there would be no long-term effects.

“The scar will remain,” the wizard said with a face full of emotion, full of regret.

Still, she was fortunate, and I only became relieved once I saw Adelia breathing regularly.

Taking a sigh of relief, I looked at Teuton’s knights on the other side of the dojo. Up

until yesterday, the Teutons had been arrogant; those people didn't exist anymore. There only remained losers who had been devastated by the disastrous results of their hubris.

'Sheek~'

And it was then that Leonberg's knights drew their swords and broadened their stances. The one who had lost his right forearm wielded his sword with the left, while the knight with two injured arms still pointed his blade skyward, groaning in pain. The warrior with a severe leg injury stood stiff as he forced himself to endure the pain.

'Chuck~'

And with this, as one, the knights of the Leonberg Kingdom raised their swords at an angle, and the palace knights also took part in the salute.

They shouted with one voice.

"Infinite respect to the best knight in the north!"

CHAPTER 212
THE SWORD, THE ROSE, AND THE LION (4)

The cheers and respect for Leonberg had already been loudly pronounced. Because of this, I didn't understand why the knights were talking about the best knight in the north, or whatever – in short, why they were shouting such strange things.

So, I looked into the faces of Leonberg's knights. Their gazes shifted to me and then rolled to the Teutonic Knights. They repeated this action of the eyes many times before looking squarely at me. They had shifted their eyes with such self-assured expressions that I had to laugh.

I understood; Leonberg's knights were instinctively resentful toward the Teutons, who had exuded arrogance while looking down upon Leonberg. Realizing this, I decided that this was as far as it would go.

"Now stop," I said after a while, stopping the knights' cheers after their resentment had cooled down a bit. "The contest has already ended. There is no need to keep reminding them of their defeat."

Bernardo Eli looked at me with a disappointed face. His eyes seemed to ask me if this wasn't what I would do, I who had mocked countless of my opponents who had already been broken.

As always, I pointedly ignored Eli's question. I then glanced at the Teutons.

The number one knight in the west was still unconscious and was being dragged away by his knights. The rest of the Rosethorns, almost none of them intact, were limping away from the dojo as they followed Duncan.

All who remained was Teuton's princess. She looked at me with a gaze I could not read. When our eyes met, she quickly looked down and departed from the dojo.

"Let's go back."

I also had nothing to do at the training field, so I left.

* * *

After checking on Adelia's progress, I returned to bed and fell asleep when the morning sun had completely risen. When I opened my eyes again, the sun was already in the middle of the sky. Soon after waking up, Eli and Arwen came to me.

"So, why the hell did you show him any mercy?" Eli asked with a baffled face. "I thought your Highness would at least take an arm."

Arwen didn't say anything, but she seemed to sympathize with what Eli said.

"I forced greater shame on him than death itself. Wouldn't it be excessive if I had cut off one of his arms?" I replied, and Eli responded immediately.

"That's why I ask. If your Highness had acted as you normally do, you would have severed an arm and shamed him even more."

I nodded at Eli's words and frowned, thinking how the hell he thought that that would be a usual thing for me to do.

"When the Warlord died, his limbs were amputated, and his head mounted on Winter Castle's wall. All the enemies your Highness have dealt with have gone through that kind of thing, but your Highness wants to say this case isn't the same?"

I tried to speak up after listening to Eli; I wanted to convince him. But I struggled to find the words, and when I said nothing, Eli asked me again. "What wind on this earth blew that made your Highness show mercy to the Duke of Teuton?"

Eli was frowning when I replied in a dismayed voice.

"If he had done at least one shallow trick, I might have done what you said I had to."

The man had halted his Aura Blade at the last moment. If Duke Duncan Seymour had wanted to exploit his advantage, he could've done it. However, he did not act dishonorably in that moment. If he had completed his attack with an Aura Blade that wouldn't have hurt my body anyway, things might have gone differently for him. And at the end of the contest, even when Duncan's fighting spirit had been broken, he still stepped up every time and faced me in battle.

I would not have thought much about it under normal circumstances, but at that

time, the resolve Eli had shown in his own struggle had not been erased from my mind. The determination of Eli, who was unable to avoid being beaten back when he faced a Master of mana rings, felt no different to me than Duncan's resolve to test my sword again and again.

That was why I had kept the duke's limbs intact.

"What is your Highness saying-"

"We're done. I'm not going to explain myself further."

Even if I were to die today, I wouldn't want to tell Eli the truth. So, I finished the story at that juncture. Eli seemed to have many questions he wanted to ask, but then his eyes flashed as if he had thought of a more important matter.

"Please give it to me."

"What?"

"None of the others have won more times than me," Eli blurted out.

I glanced at Arwen to see if his bullshit was true.

"I won four times. Sir Quéon – four times. The others did not get more than three wins. Other than that, the Teutonic Master who was defeated by Sir Adelia, claimed four victories. And Bernardo Eli won five times."

Eli's face became more enthusiastic as he heard Arwen's words.

I picked up the dwarven sword I had kept in the corner of the room while I stared at him. I then offered Eli his sword.

"Uh?" Eli looked at me with a stupid face as I showed him the sword. I decided that he believed it to be such a precious gift that it was wasted on him. So, I pulled the sword back toward me, holding onto it.

"What are you doing, Eli? Not taking the sword – do you hate receiving gifts?"

"Who's not taking it?" he said in an angry tone as I pretended to keep his sword, and he reached out his hand. Eli snapped the sword from my grasp. As if having stolen a

treasure, Eli wrapped both of his arms around the sword as if I would take it from him and drooped his head to study it.

I gave a last glance at Eli and walked toward one side of the room, the side with the chest full of dwarven weapons. I then selected a sword from the chest and picked it up. It was a very beautiful sword with a roaring lion forming the end of its hilt.

It was also a masterpiece among masterpieces forged with great care by meisters. I looked at the sword and turned to Arwen, smiling happily.

“Arwen.”

“Yes, your Highness?”

“Receive.”

“Yes, your Highness,” Arwen said, looking at Eli with a somewhat regretful face, then turned to me. When she saw the sword in my hands, her eyes stretched wide.

“It’s your sword.”

Arwen shook her head, studying the sword’s form as if possessed.

“I haven’t claimed the most victories like Bernardo Eli – I haven’t done anything to be given such a precious dwarven sword.”

She repeatedly refused, saying that undeserving people couldn’t receive such treasures, and Arwen said it all in a sad tone.

“I originally brought these swords here intending to give them as gifts to you champions, so don’t refuse it.”

I tapped the roaring lion forged into the handle with my fingertips, and Arwen’s eyes stretched even wider. She still showed no signs of accepting the sword, however.

“Tcha,” I clucked my tongue and bent forward. I immediately unsheathed the sword buckled to Arwen’s waist, and began to slide the meister-forged sword into its place.

“Your Highness! This- What is this!”

“Please stand still.”

I managed to stop the frightened Arwen from pulling back from me and started to focus on what I was doing, but it proved more difficult than I thought, so I took my time.

“Because Adelia always does it, I forgot how to properly sheathe it into its scabbard.”

“Your Highness! Why are you doing this! Please take your hands away!”

Even while I was struggling, Arwen tried to hold me back, her face blushing red.

“Stop talking. I’m concentrating.”

Whether Arwen heard me or not, I ignored her, being eager to insert the sword into its sheath buckled around her waist.

“Oh, that’s it now.”

It’s was only when her restless hips stopped moving that I managed to fill Arwen’s scabbard with the new sword. I straightened my back.

“That’s right. As expected, the dwarves have a good eye for this sort of thing.”

The sword matched well with Arwen’s scabbard, her original scabbard at that.

“Well, your Highness-”

I gave a satisfied laugh as I watched Arwen and her blushing face retreat from me, with her not even thinking about touching the sword. I then glanced at Eli. The unexpected situation rendered him fish-eyed.

“I’m a champion too!” he finally shouted. His face was filled with resentment as he cried this out. He had struggled to gain his victory and was given a sword, but had now watched someone get a new sword to grace her hips with her having no intention of accepting it.

“You said they are for the champions of Leonberg, so of course there is one for me, right?” Eli asked as he met my gaze, swallowing as he tried to correct his expression. I noticed that his gaze became nailed on the ornamented lion hilt specially crafted by

a meister.

“One per person.”

“This one is the reward I got for fighting!”

“Uh huh. Congratulations. You fought really well.”

“Well, do I get one then?”

“You received congratulations. You received a sword. I think we’re done.”

“Didn’t you say that there are swords specially prepared for us champions?” Bernardo Eli protested, stuck on the same question.

“I have the generous heart of a gift-giver, and you have your gift.”

Eli groaned and was left speechless by my impudent words.

“Well, your Highness, please take this sword back now,” Arwen begged.

Instead of answering her words, I gave a stern look at Eli, asking him if he wanted to make Arwen uncomfortable. When Eli heard me mention Arwen, he groaned and put up no further protest. It was only after I thoroughly enjoyed Eli’s defeated appearance that I gave him the sword the meisters had forged for him. Of course, I first recovered the other sword I had given him.

“I’ll give you something else instead of the sword as reward for your contest victory, Eli.”

“If it’s something else… Armor?”

When I nodded, Eli broke into a broad, wild grin. However, his mirth lasted only a while, and the smile on his face hardened into a grimace. Then Eli’s eyes narrowed as he asked me, “Does that mean that you are giving all the champions armor?”

I didn’t answer him.

“Your Highness!” Eli cried as he jumped up, and he then whined for a long time.

“I will take care of it.”

He eventually shut his mouth, but that was only after I promised that he would receive a separate dwarf-forged shield. After I had barely managed to shut Eli up, I asked Arwen what the messenger who had come to the door wanted.

“Your Highness, the leaders of the kingdom have long been waiting for your Highness to wake up.”

* * *

I went straight to the conference hall.

Marshal Bielefeld, Maximilian, Siorin, and the other leaders of the kingdom were waiting for me.

“Your Highness.”

“Brother.”

After exchanging greetings, I placed my hands on the conference table.

“What are the Teutons doing?”

Siorin gave me a summary of the Teuton’s actions. Duncan Seymour Tudor was resting in his room, taking no food or drink, and Siorin said the other knights were busy healing the wounds they had suffered the day before.

“Only the Princess of Teuton has sent people to ask if your Highness has awakened.”

“Was she protesting the events of yesterday’s contest?”

It was Maximilian who answered me this time.

“No. The princess has no intention of expressing any complaints about the contest. We have been told that Teuton accepts the results.”

“Then why are you looking for me?”

Unless 3333 protests had been launched about the previous day’s events, the

princess of Teuton had no reason to seek me at this point in time. Now, rather than talking with our kingdom, it was time for the Teutons to make up for their defeat and start thinking what their counter-proposals would be to attain some of Leonberg's dwarven armaments.

Maximilian was staring at me and started to speak carefully.

"When I asked in person what it was, she said it was a very personal affair."

"A personal matter?"

"The princess of Teuton wants to meet with you, brother."

Marshal Bielefeld, who was next to Maximilian, now spoke.

"However, she said that she wanted only the two of you to meet one another, if possible."

"Two people?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Only two people without any attendants."

I frowned as I heard the Marshal's words. Negotiations had broken down, and the situation was such that the duke of their country could not eat or drink due to his terrible defeat. I couldn't figure out a reason for Hestia to ask that we meet alone.

There was no benefit to be gained from the current situation if only the two of us talked. As I wracked my head to grasp the princess's intentions, others gave their opinions.

"I saw how the princess of Teuton looked at you yesterday, brother, and it was unusual. Do you think that, by seeing your lionesque figure, compassion has been born within her…"

Maximilian's words flowed past the back of my ears.

"If you meet with her, you will naturally learn the princess's intentions," Siorin said, not hiding his hostility, and when I glanced at him, he nodded.

"Let's meet first," I said, nodding, after thinking on it for a moment.

“Send someone to let them know that I have allowed her to stand on her own. Tell her to meet me at my palace.”

According to the leaders’ words, I would soon know how different the princess was on the inside compared to her external facade if I met with her. I went straight to my palace.

And soon enough, Princess Hestia arrived. She was many times more elaborately decorated and dressed than when I had seen her at the dinner table – with a red, blushing face, like a girl in love.

“Ahahaha.”

Laughter flowed from me. I was hoping she wasn’t asking for my hand in marriage by showing off her modest beauty like this. By all means, that would be a waste of both our times.

CHAPTER 213
THE SWORD, THE ROSE, AND THE LION (5)

The Princess of Teuton looked at me with her characteristically thin smile.I held back the desire to get up from my seat, forcing my ass down, which kept lifting and descending.

“Why did you come to me?”

From now on, I was here to listen to business.

“I express my infinite respect for the fighting spirit of the knights of Leonberg, even if it may be late, as well as the amazing prowess of your Highness the Crown Prince.”

The princess looked down on me gracefully.

“In addition, the Teutons and I are sincerely grateful for the compassion of your Highness, who showed mercy toward Duke Seymour and ended the battle without hurting him.”

Even though his body was intact, his mind was ruined, so I didn’t know how she could term that mercy. My first impression was that her words were so unreasonable that it was surely sneaky talk. There was no sign of sarcasm on the princess’s face, however. Even her twinkling eyes were full of benevolent favor.

Most men would easily have been fooled by her slender appearance and the words that had flowed from her. But I didn’t belong to that class of man; I was just sickened by it.

Approaching with an innocent face and tying down the opponent with pleasant words, as if applying honey to her tongue: A gaze that forces the other person to feel compassion for her.

All of that was just too familiar to me. The Elder High Elf Sigrun had already used it to try and get control of me. Compared to the millennium-old Elder High Elf’s masterpiece of thespianism, the princess’s acting was a flimsy attempt to behold.

“In addition, apart from winning and losing, we were able to develop a deeper understanding of each other through the contest, so we are looking forward to the relationship between our two countries that will develop in the future.”

The princess continued to talk nonsense. Far from deepening the understanding between the two countries, only the goals of both negotiating sides have deepened.

“Is that your business?”

If I left it as it was, I would have to listen to these unlikable words all day long, so I spoke up, unable to stand it anymore.

The princess glanced at me. She looked different than the times when she had acted as a shy girl, and now she gazed into my face. I didn’t know what my face looked like exactly, but whatever my expression was, it wouldn’t be what she had expected.

“Ah…”

As I broke eye contact with her, the princess was amazed after meeting my gaze, closing her eyes while her eyelashes trembled – like a girl hurt by harsh words.

I could see she was also very strong, probably knowing by now that acting all decent was useless. My cold attitude toward her surely must have settled this truth into her head.

She clenched her fists and opened and closed her lips several times. Silence reigned for a long time. How long in hell did I have to match the beat of this new skill of hers? I started to get annoyed. Judging that she had other intentions, I forced myself to remain seated. But my patience evaporated at that point.

“If you have nothing more to say, I’ll close the meeting now.”

After saying that, I jumped up from my seat.

“The Leonberg Kingdom,” I heard Princess Hestia say behind my back as I headed to the door.

I turned my head. The princess looked straight at me, raising her head, which had been lowered during the silence – still with that small body, still that colorless face.

All that had changed was that she had straightened her shoulders a little more and that she had picked up a pretentious smile.

However, that alone completely changed her mood and temperament. I wondered if she was really the same person.

“No, how far are you looking, Crown Prince?”

The subtle, meek voice that seemed to whisper into my ears was nowhere to be found; Hestia now spoke in a clear voice.

“Is Leonberg’s goal just to win the war with the Empire and survive as a country?”

I turned and looked straight at her.

“Continue.”

She then raised her chin.

“Teuton looks further than that,” she said, speaking on without pause. “Continental supremacy. That’s what Teuton wants.

Harmony between those countries set against the Empire was just the beginning; Teuton had prepared a lot more.

“And with the west’s best knight leading the armies? If so, I apologize. Your sharpest sword lies broken because of me,” I said in a grotesque tone, reproaching Teuton, which dreamt dreams that did not fit its situation.

The princess was not angry; she just laughed with a smile that I could not understand.

“Your Highness. I have already congratulated the Crown Prince on his victory over Duke Seymour, from my heart.”

Hestia’s full blooming smile twisted into a sneer, but she quickly returned her sneering mouth to its original state.

“If your Majesty hadn’t overwhelmingly defeated Duke Seymour, I wouldn’t have had the chance to come to the fore of the delegation.”

It was an unexpected story, but I knew the love of Duncan Seymour Tudor toward his unusual niece.

“Contrary to what is known, the two of you don’t have a good relationship?”

“Duke Seymour really treats me as if I am his daughter,” Hestia said as she shook her head, then saying, “But that love is only meaningful when my uncle keeps to the subject.”

Her mouth twisted once more. There seemed to be a story there, but it was none of my concern.

“I don’t think he’s been crying out or asking to see me,” Hestia said in a light tone, her eyes open wide. Then she suddenly began to laugh. After a while, she stopped and apologized to me. I didn’t care, so I remained silent.

“I am just grateful for your great consideration.”

I wasn’t in a mood to be thanked, but I didn’t really feel bad. Rather, my mind was more relaxed than before. Instead of wearing the pretentious face that reminded me of the Elder High Elf, I felt much better with Hestia’s current lively appearance.

“As I said a little while ago, Teuton is uniting countries against the Empire. In fact, a few countries have joined, and unless there is some great surprise, Teuton will be the leader of the alliance.”

“So we shouldn’t stretching Leonberg’s position so far that we’ll have to take care of ourselves, you mean?”

At my blatant words, the princess pouted her mouth and straightened her face again.

Then she asked me, “Do you have any intention of being the leading country of the league Teuton prepared?”

And so the princess asked me if we wanted to become the leader of the anti-imperial alliance – A very unexpected proposal.

“Now I’m getting a little interested.”

Up till then, I had been listening to the princess while standing at the door; I now

returned to my chair and took a seat.

“Of course, this is only possible if your Highness has accepted my proposal.”

I looked at Hestia, buried in the large chair. The princess laughed, and her eyes were blazing with heat; it was far too much ambition to carry in such a small body.

I had no choice but to revise my assessment of Princess Hestia.

What she was was not a snake, but an imoogi, a great serpent longing to become a dragon.

And it seemed Hestia wanted to become a dragon even at the cost of her own country.

So, I asked her, “What do you want in exchange from Leonberg?”

“Marriage,” the princess replied without hesitation. “Please allow me to become the Crown Princess of Leonberg.”

* * *

Hestia Neumann Tudor was a woman loved by all. When she was young, she gained the devoted love of her father and uncle, Duke Seymour, with her angelic appearance and cleverness. When Hestia grew up, her natural off-white hair shined ever brighter, and she became loved by many men.

The woman Teuton loves: That is Hestia Neumann Tudor, and that was all.

The king knew of her intelligence, but he wanted her to remain a princess. The praises from the nobles and knights were nothing but admiration for one of the beautiful flowers in the Tudor garden.

And that wasn’t what Hestia Neumann Tudor wanted. She hoped that everyone would look at her and pay homage to the spirit that dwelt in her eyes. She did not want to be admired for her beauty; she did not want to be loved by her father and the duke for being an elegant woman. Hestia hoped that everyone would genuinely respect her from their hearts.

She wanted them to look up at her and fear her.

Her father loved her very much, but he denied her aspirations; rather, he was wary of them.

Because the obedience and praise Hestia sought could only be granted to one person within Teuton. While her father was unaware of her ambitions, Hestia tried to change his mind. She believed his thoughts would change once she showed him her abilities.

But it didn't turn out like that. The more capable Hestia became and the more she outshined her brothers, the more strongly the king suppressed her.

She felt sorrowful about this, so she sought out the king and protested.

'Do not cross the line. Be content with those things granted to you as a princess. Nothing greater is allowed to you.'

It was with a stern face that Hestia had never seen before that the king told her not to covet the power of her brothers. It was an obvious warning.

Fortunately, although she was young, she was clever enough to understand her father's warnings.

She also knew what would happen if she violated those rules.

From then on, Hestia played the part that the king wanted her to play.

Fortunately, it wasn't difficult. Just imitating the young children of her age was enough. But apart from succeeding in the act, Hestia's insides became raw. Her unattainable aspirations ate her body, and she slowly withered.

And so, more time had passed.

One day, Hestia Neumann Tudor heard of the war between the Kingdom of Leonberg and the Empire. She heard that a noble country located in the north had won against the great Empire and that Teuton decided to bring them into the alliance.

And when Hestia heard that Teuton has decided to use one of the princesses as a token of the alliance, she declared that she herself would go to the Kingdom of Leonberg.

During this time, the other princesses had refused to go to a small country on the fringes, so the king was in trouble. After some time, Hestia's father acceded to her request.

It wasn't clear for Hestia Neumann Tudor whether it was because the king no longer wanted to experience the injustice to see his daughter agonizing over her reality or because he was wary of her aspirations and feared that they would cause trouble in Teuton.

It didn't matter to Hestia either way. All she knew was that it would be nice to escape from her cramped cage. And at last, the king entrusted a political position to her: Head of the delegation.

It was the first time Hestia had received a position, but she knew nothing had changed and that it was not due to her showing her abilities. Even if she used her proficiency to achieve the purposes of the delegation, all she would receive was a position in another country.

The same situation would be her fate whether she was treated like a princess of Teuton, a princess of the Leonberg Kingdom, or a flower blooming in a garden.

Her uncle, Duke Seymour, was appointed as escort to the delegation.

And so the seal was stamped, and they journeyed to Leonberg as scheduled. It was located in the northernmost part of the continent, so it was a rough journey. Hestia's weakened body was eventually unable to overcome the harsh climate of the north, and she became sick.

She boiled with the heat of fever, and so sick was Hestia all the time that she couldn't take a step outside her carriage. It was only a few days after Hestia's arrival in Leonberg's capital that she could take care of herself, heal herself.

Although Hestia was well, she did not leave her room, using the excuse of being ill. The Duke of Seymour didn't push her either, because he was compassionate of her situation, which was to enter marriage and live in another country.

However, Hestia could not delay things by using sickness as an excuse forever. So, after hesitating for a few days, she reluctantly attended dinner.

And there, she saw the blood members of the Leonberger family.

CHAPTER 214
THE SWORD, THE ROSE, AND THE LION (6)

The prince who had been called the Young Lion of the North, and the second prince who had become revered as a saint in recent years: The first thing that caught Hestia's eyes were these two brothers.

Their faces looked too slender to be called manly, but it didn't look uninspiring to Hestia. Such delicate features and soft expressions were never seen upon Teuton's men, who revered manliness.

Hestia heard that the atmosphere in the Leonberg Kingdom was not different from that in Teuton, but these men looked different than she had expected, very different indeed.

The second prince was dignified in even the slightest details of his actions and speech, and he did not forget to show consideration to the other person in conversation. There were no faults to blame him off, either as a human being, a royal, or a man. If Hestia was forced to catch one fault, though-

"My brother…"

"If it wasn't for my brother…"

"At that time, my brother…"

All Prince Maximilian did was open his mouth to talk about his brother. His brother, his brother, his brother… no matter how much his brother deserved the praise, the second prince looked like a duckling waddling after a mother duck. Still, the impression Maximilian had on Hestia was more than she had expected, excepting his excessive admiration and praise for his brother.

The Crown Prince was less impressive than Hestia's expectations, however. He did not show the same courtesy as his brother, not in so much as a single glance. No, this prince stared at Hestia with disrespect. It was a type of gaze she had never encountered, however.

The way men usually gazed at Hestia fell into two categories: Those who watched her with feelings of admiration, regarding her as a flower out of their reach, and then there were those with high status and skills who looked at Hestia with greed, with the aspiration to defeat her at once.

The prince's gaze didn't belong to either class. His eyes were the dark blue of the northern sea, and they darkened countless times more during the dinner. The emotions contained within them were ones of curious interest, nothing more and nothing less. He seemed to view Hestia as an interesting sight, his eyes holding a withdrawn, unpleasant emotion.

Hestia swore countless times inside her mind at the rudeness of the prince. An unknown feeling of resentment arose within Hestia, and she realized it was due to the Crown Prince's attitude, who seemed to be unconcerned about her presence.

Hestia laughed deeply, then. She had no intention of being vulgar, but she also had no intention of allowing the man to watch her as if he was viewing a rare species of animal. Hestia thought it would be enough to make eye contact with Prince Adrian and smile slightly. Quite a few men had failed to escape from her gaze alone.

However, that tactic didn't work either. Hestia's self-esteem was injured to some extent, but she tried to shrug it off and continued to lock eyes with the Crown Prince.

The more she did that, the colder were the depths that the prince's eyes sank into. When even that faint interest in his eyes cooled down into nothingness, Hestia felt a mysterious sense of loss.

That probably was why she went to the Leonberger royal family's dojo, even if she wasn't interested in the battles between knights. When she next snapped awake, she had become the referee. And this is what she witnessed there: How fierce the knights of Leonberg had become after their war with the Empire. If one of their arms were severed, they acted as if even that wasn't enough to end the duel. It was absurd.

What do they gain by risking their lives in the contest? Compared to them, the Rosethorn Knights were like pacifists. Leonberg's knights were truly like fierce beasts, and they weren't just fierce. Even though Hestia had no skill in swordsmanship, she saw that the Rosethorn knights' swords could not reach Leonberg's knights. And the biggest difference between the sides was the quad-chain knights.

There were five high profile quad-chain knights among the Rosethorns, Hestia's uncle excluded. On the other hand, only three Masters of Leonberg had been sent to the contest.

"They still have knights that absorb mana in the heart."

"I heard rumors, but it must be true."

"It seems that there are no true warriors in Leonberg."

Through the overheard conversations of the Rosethorn Knights, Hestia learned that Leonberg had two Masters who used mana hearts, which was treated as a waste of talent.

"If we break their mercenaries and the chopsticks they use as swords, will we even look good? This will all stop by then."

"A single strike would be enough."

The Rosethorn Knights already proclaimed their victory, saying that they were at least warriors who had honed decent skills.

And then…

'Bwak!'

'Klank!'

They were smashed into every shade of defeat by the Masters of Leonberg, who they had looked down upon, two of whom were even women, not men. Martial prowess was exclusively possessed by men; it was impossible for a woman to wield a sword – at least, this was believed in Teuton.

However, it seemed that Leonberg did not share such beliefs.

"Next!" the black-haired Master shouted as she wiped clean her bloody longsword. It looked so dazzling, so much so that Hestia Neumann Tudor couldn't stop fantasizing. The image of this woman, her opponent, kneeling while she stood confidently over him – this was how Hestia wanted to be. She cheered for the female knight, making sure no one realized it.

But unfortunately, the knight lost. The black-haired girl was defeated by one of Teuton's quad-chain knights after four victories. And the next female Master of Leonberg was defeated by Hestia's uncle, Duke Seymour, who fought fiercer than any other man. His ruthless hand had not been true to his usual, just self. That was a warning to everyone: To the knights of Leonberg who were full of energy, and to Teuton's quad-chain knights who were defeated by women, who are considered insignificant, and to Duncan's niece and her unattainable aspirations.

The small feeling of excitement Hestia had felt quickly subsided. She silently expressed her condolences for the terrible future that was to come to the bloody dojo. But the disastrous result she had expected did not happen.

"Tcha."

The Crown Prince seemed entirely unconcerned about the contest while he talked with others; he was now in the ring. The Rosethorn Knights were bellowing loud protests.

"How can he so easily cut through our lord's energy?"

"The prince jumped in while the duke's posture was unstable!"

Through their conversation, Hestia learned that the Crown Prince had completely countered her uncle's energy in a single movement.

'He defeated imperial paladins several times,' Hestia thought, 'It seems that it wasn't just rumored. What a wonderful achievement at such a young age.'

Still, Hestia Neumann Tudor thought that such an achievement was meaningless in front of her uncle, who was said to be the best in the west. It was a hasty judgment.

There was a quick flash of light, and the duel was already over – without Hestia being sure what had happened. Her uncle stood, looking desperate as he held a sword cut in half. The prince who stood before him raised his chin arrogantly. Both men were fine, without wounds, but it wasn't difficult to tell who was the winner and who was the loser. Surprisingly, Hestia's uncle, called the best knight in the west, couldn't even stop the prince's first strike.

But something more surprising was yet to come.

“Again!”

The Crown Prince suggested that the quality of the duke’s sword had not been good and suggested that they compete again. Hestia’s uncle was angrier than ever before and entered the duel with the same seriousness as that of facing his life-long enemy. And he lost – he lost countless times and suffered greater and greater shame. Later, he couldn’t even resist when he was attacked.

“Princess!”

When the Crown Prince called out, Hestia declared that the contest had ended with the prince’s victory. Until then, her uncle could still not wake up. In the end, he was dragged away, being supported by knights with hopeless faces. Then, he became stuck in his lodgings, never exiting through the door.

As Hestia considered her uncle’s image when she had last seen him, it seemed impossible that he would regain his usual energetic appearance while he remained in Leonberg. The atmosphere of the entire delegation became subdued. Negotiations haven’t even started in earnest yet, but a defeatist attitude was already rampant. Only Hestia Neumann Tudor was enlivened by the events; it was an opportunity.

It was only after her uncle, who was both her guardian and her keeper, became a recluse that Hestia knew she had become the delegation’s real voice. She immediately took action.

After making her plans, she started seeking an audience with the Crown Prince. It wasn’t her favorite method, but she decided to use her world-famous beauty in her favor. However, the prince didn’t seem to be swayed by the presence of a beautiful woman.

“If you have nothing more to say, I’ll close the meeting now.”

The Crown Prince had said this with cold eyes, and Hestia was unsure whether he was taking a gamble. His words weren’t empty; while she kept her seat, the prince jumped from his and started walking to the door.

It was then Hestia Neumann Tudor had an intuition: She knew that if she didn’t stop the Crown Prince from leaving, she would never again have a chance to be alone with him. Before he turned to the door, the expression on the prince’s face made it clear to Hestia that he considered the current meeting as a waste of time.

“The Leonberg Kingdom. No, how far are you looking, Crown Prince?”

She halted the prince, who was about to leave and decided to give voice to the plan she had kept within herself all this time. Hestia’s heart pounded, knowing she could lose everything if this went wrong. It was a gamble she would never have taken if things were as they usually were.

“Now I’m getting a little interested.”

Fortunately, the Crown Prince seemed to like Hestia’s proposal. Then he asked what she wanted from it, and Hestia Neumann Tudor did not hesitate to answer.

“Marriage. Please allow me to become the Crown Princess of Leonberg.”

It was a truly ironic fate for Hestia. She had hoped that she could go beyond those limits of being a woman that was imposed upon her. And now, for the first time in her life, it was she who was asking another to marry her, she who needed it. A bitter smile came to her lips.

She knew this situation would be ideal for her.

According to prevailing rumors, the Crown Prince was not a man who cared too much about his domestic matters. He was said to prefer being on the battlefield rather than staying at the royal palace. Even now, he had left the task of heading the delegation to his brother, the Prime Minister, and the Great Marshal. It was clear that he had little interest in political subtleties.

It wouldn’t be bad to be such a person’s wife: The man goes off to war while the woman gets to rule.

“If your Highness welcomes me in marriage, both you and the Kingdom of Leonberg will gain a lot.”

Hestia believed that the Crown Prince would not refuse her offer; the position of the league’s leader was worth it. Hestia believed it; she truly did.

“Not possible.”

No- there came a resolute objection that didn’t allow any words to counter it.

“If I leave you on your own, princess, I think you’ll try to swallow up our entire kingdom,” the prince explained his refusal in a cold tone.

Hestia couldn’t even refute his statement; she couldn’t lie while facing his gaze, which made her feel as if she was transparent, as if the prince was looking inside of her.

Of course, she had expected him to accept, so she was left speechless. Her lips quivered.

“But I can think of something else,” the Crown Prince said, grinning as he stood up from his seat.

“What else is there?” Hestia managed to ask, only then regaining her senses.

“Why do you ask me about that?” the prince replied, clucking his tongue. “Aren’t you the representative of Teuton?”

Hestia’s heart jumped when the prince said she was Teuton’s representative. Her face became blank, vacant without her knowledge. The prince didn’t seem to be paying attention to her thoughts. At least, Hestia thought so.

“Let’s think about it. You know something? In the negotiations with Leonberg, you may yet break the walls you so dearly wish to overcome.”

Hestia was left speechless again.

“If you gain the exclusive right to trade in dwarven weapons, then even a princess without any real power will be able to stand in the center of the power structure, all at once.”

The Crown Prince was surprisingly aware of Hestia’s ambitions and circumstances, the horror in her heart which she had not yet resolved.

‘Thump thump thump～’

Hestia’s heart started beating faster.

“Well, I don’t know what you mean.”

She tried to refine her expression by doing away with her pretense. The prince didn't continue speaking about her dangerous ambitions; he just chuckled.

'Drchk~'

The Crown Prince had already turned the doorknob but suddenly looked back.

"The next time we meet, let's stop with this talentless acting."

Hestia's face became dazed by the unexpected words, but she managed to speak.

"Not one of the Teutons have ever said as much to me."

The crown prince laughed when Hestia jokingly criticized him for his harsh evaluation of her.

"All of the Teutons have failed to notice."

When Hestia heard the prince's conclusion, she finally burst into the laughter she had tried to endure keeping within her. Then she felt the prince's gaze settle on her, and she shut her mouth.

If her uncle or father had been present, they would've rebuked her for not acting like a princess.

Not the Crown Prince; he said that he liked her appearance of honest laughter rather than the flower-like laughter she created as part of her act.

"In the future, please laugh like that in front of me. Because you look better that way."

After saying this, the prince left the room.

'Bwak~'

The door was closed. Hestia Neumann Tudor was left alone and looked blankly at the door, and she suddenly touched her face.

'In the future, laugh like that in front of me.'

'Because it looks good.'

The short words the Crown Prince had spoken rumbled like thunder in Hestia's head.

'Why is my heart jumping like this?' she thought.

* * *

"Did I do anything useful?"

As soon as I left the room, regret flooded me, and I tried to shake off those regrets.

The princess of Teuton possessed talents that were rare in this world, among which was her ability to bloom on her own at any time, even if it wouldn't be for me. It was a much better option for her to use marriage to fulfill her future purposes, rather than putting herself in such a position for moderate gains.

"The most beautiful rose in the Tudor garden."

I suddenly remembered how the Teutons referred to Hestia, and I laughed.

"The rose has many thorns."

I would rather not know whether I would call her a lioness.

CHAPTER 215
IT WAS EMPTY, BUT IT WAS FULL (1)

From the day of the contest onward, the Teutons became utterly depressed. Duncan's defeat was too hard for him to bear, so the knight who was their chief became a half-defeated man, locked away in his room.

In the midst of that, there was a person who struck out alone, however.

She was named Hestia Neumann Tudor, princess of Teuton. She had taken the opportunity offered by her Uncle's absence, taking the power of the delegation leader unto herself. And she took her first action as undisputed representative of Teuton.

"The princess of Teuton has asked to meet with your Highness. Alone."

It was another request to meet with her on my own, and I did not refuse.

And soon after that, the princess came to my palace.

"Your Highness, are you well?"

"Hello. I saw you only a few days ago, so I am still well," I said.

"It might have been a few days for you, but for me, these few days felt like years," came Hestia's hurried reply. I looked at the princess for a moment. She no longer had the squint to her eyes, as if her facial muscles were cramping, nor did she show an uncomfortable, pretentious smile.

Hestia was still somewhat stiff, but her face was more human now. If she was pulling a different act than before, I decided to get rid of it right away.

So I smiled fiercely and asked her, "Why did you ask to see me?"

She responded as if having awaited the question.

“I want to resume the negotiations that were interrupted.”

“Good. I allow it.”

The princess widened her eyes to my immediate response. It seemed that her request had been for me to be part of the resumed negotiations personally, and I had no intention of doing that.

It wasn’t my job, but Montpellier and Siorin’s to gain something from the talks. And they had ability enough to do so.

No matter how much of a ‘thorny rose’ the princess was, her talents had just begun to bloom.

Compared to the monstrous Montpellier and the stubborn Siorin, she was just a single flower in a greenhouse. There was no reason for me to suffer through the pain of conducting diplomatic talks.

“What else do you want?”

The princess shook her head to my question.

“I don’t want anything right now.”

“Then we are done here-”

“But I have one question.”

After saying that, Hestia hesitated for a moment, then asked me, “What is the reason for you being so good to me?”

When I frowned at her outrageous words, she hurriedly explained.

“The exclusive right to trade in dwarven weapons.”

“I didn’t say I was giving it to you for free.”

It was a bargaining chip, and we had exclusive authority over the supply. I wasn’t about to make a deal with Teuton by getting nothing in return. When the princess heard my words, she shared her thoughts.

“I’m an outsider as far as weapons are concerned, so I don’t know how much dwarven armaments are truly worth and how much power there is to be gained in having authority over their trade. But I’m not foolish enough to miss a golden opportunity because of a lack of greed.”

“I’m glad you understand.”

“I’m not alone in this. Even if the Duke of Seymour were here, it would be the same. Even if someone else were here, the Kingdom of Leonberg would not be losing money on this deal.”

Hestia paused for a moment while staring at me and then spoke softly.

“But why me?”

Her eyes were shining with a strange light as if they held a great burden.

“Because you are the current representative of Teuton.”

Hestia tried to hide her worries after hearing my patient answer and asked again, “Is it just that?”

“You’re also a better talker than Duke Seymour.”

“If that’s the case, why give exclusive rights only to me?”

“If we are going to continue trading anyway, it would be convenient in many ways to keep trading with one person rather than having to go through multiple channels… Now, what can be more important than that?”

“It’s important for me to know,” came her decisive answer, and I replied with a sigh.

“If the Duke of Seymour had been there, he would not have offered that Leonberg becomes the leader of the alliance that Teuton has created. That’s why I have offered a benefit which matches the reward that you have suggested.”

“And that’s all?”

I was becoming offended because it felt like I was being questioned.

“I don’t know what answer you’re looking for. Even if there was another reason, I am under no obligation to explain it.”

Naturally, my tone became blunt. But, strangely, when the princess heard my blunt words, her expression became brighter.

“I see. There is a reason why you can’t tell me.”

“What does it sound like?”

“I promise. You will never regret choosing me as your trading partner,” the princess said with a stubborn face, changing the topic. Although she knew I was keeping things from her, her conclusion wasn’t too bad. I almost laughed at her words and finished our discussion there, but I decided to give her a friendly warning instead.

“It won’t be easy. Those who stand as representatives of Leonberg are tough customers.”

“Then let’s do it the hard way,” the princess replied with a confident smile.

I gave Hestia some words of sincere encouragement and immediately made her leave.

After the princess had left and I remained alone, I frowned. I was strangely tired.

I hadn’t talked that long with the princess, but it felt as if I had been talking all day long.

‘The Most Beautiful Rose’ was a gritty character to deal with, so I hoped that I would never meet her again. Fortunately, I didn’t think I would encounter her while the negotiations were in progress. Anyway, the proceedings had been left in the care of Montpellier and Siorin. If I met Hestia again, it would be after the positions of both sides had been properly determined. I definitely thought so – and was proved wrong.

It was after I had visited Adelia – who had barely regained consciousness – when I returned to my palace and found the princess waiting for me there.

“Your Highness.”

“Let’s go inside.”

I invited her inside the palace to see if she had anything to say.

“I can’t tell if he is a negotiator or if he is a fisherman who has set up a net.”

When we were alone, the princess started complaining without end. Her timid appearance, which had existed when she had first come to the palace, was nowhere to be found.

“How tragic is it that such an arrogant and nasty person exists in this world?”

I was surprised when Hestia started complaining, but the moment I heard her, I immediately knew who her complaints were directed at. The image of Montpellier swam clear in my mind; it looked like he had turned the princess inside out. It was natural.

Montpellier was inherently weak toward the strong and infinitely strong toward the weak.

In the eyes of such a man, Teuton was obviously weak after they had been crushed in the contest, and Leonberg, with its attractive offer of dwarven-forged armaments, was the stronger party.

I bet that Montpellier was relieving himself of all the stress of losing his estates and being forced to settle in Leonberg by being harsh on Teuton.

I understood the princess’s feelings, but…

“I don’t know why the hell you’re coming to me to and saying all these things.”

I didn’t understand the reason for Hestia to come and complain so much in front of me, I who wasn’t even a member of her country.

“I hope you don’t forget that the person who you are cursing about now is my subordinate, the man I have personally appointed to be in charge of negotiations.”

When I told Hestia that she shouldn’t complain to me but to her fellow Teutons, her reply was spoken with a shameless face.

“They know me as a meek and good princess. I can’t act like this in front of them. If I do, they won’t take my complaints seriously, but rather believe they are listening to

someone nagging."

"No matter how things are-"

"And it's okay to talk openly in front of you about these things, as you are the Crown Prince."

"I don't think you know what you're saying."

The princess didn't even pretend to listen to me.

"Woo. Your Highness, thanks to this, my heart has become more comfortable."

Princess Hestia spoke alone and expressed gratitude alone. She then bowed her head to me in goodbye and departed. The next day, I found her at my palace again, and on the day after that, and also on the next. At times, she gossiped about Montpellier, while on other occasions, she complained that Siorin was acting too strict.

As the days went by, her chattering became worse, and my head started to hurt.

I could eventually stand it no longer and ordered that the entrance to my palace be locked.

The princess's messenger then came from time to time to request meetings, but he was completely barred from entry by the palace knights.

"I have done the right thing."

But my peace didn't last long.

"There are rumors in the palace. It is being said that Princess Hestia Neumann Tudor has visited the first prince's palace to the point where she has become exhausted. These days, instead of coming in person, they say that she sends a messenger every day."

This time, it was the smirking Bielefeld's turn to pay me a visit.

"Who the hell says these things!"

"Well, it's not gossip without reason. It doesn't seem like a mere rumor that the

princess often visited the first prince's palace."

The marquis volunteered to be the man to pull a bottle of liquor from my showcase, poured himself a glass, and grunted in satisfaction after the first sip. I wanted to say something about this, but Bielefeld's face had become serious.

"It is said that his Majesty and the Eastern Fleet are four days away from port."

When he said this, my eyes widened.

"And the messenger reported that this news was two weeks old and that he had come here immediately after hearing it. So by now, his Majesty must have made port and is heading to the capital by land."

My heart tickled, and I felt something that couldn't be described.

"The negotiations with Teuton are hectic, but it looks like they will become more so while we prepare a welcoming ceremony," were the words I finally said after searching long for an answer, and the words sounded awkward to me.

"Do not worry, Your Highness. I have already prepared everything," the marquis said with a laugh as he looked at me.

"If the time comes, your Highness just needs to go to the front of the city gate and greet his Majesty and the Eastern Legion," Bielefeld said. I nodded, so he added, "Then I have told your Highness everything I wanted to say, so let me get up."

The marquis emptied the drink from his glass in one go and left.

I looked at the closed door for a long time before speaking to myself.

"Is he finally coming?"

Suddenly, my head bowed as I grabbed my face with both my hands.

Somehow, the corners of my mouth seemed to be slightly raised.

* * *

Negotiations, which had been sluggish for a while, were nearing their end.

Once detailed conditions had been established, and diplomatic treaties were signed between the two countries, negotiations with Teuton would be complete – at least officially.

The deal between the princess and me was a matter to be handled as a secret agreement, not in the official treaty. And finally, all official negotiations were over.

All that had to be done was for the representatives of both sides to sign and then stamp down their royal families' seals.

"The name I will write on this agreement is yours, not mine."

I decided to honor the king with the treaty. It was an achievement that could never be said to be a minor one, and one I hoped would remain intact for future generations to profit from.

"I can only admire the words from your Highness's heart," Bielefeld said with a happy smile as he looked at me. Maximilian and others also looked at me with faces similar to Bielefeld's. The only person who did not smile was Teuton's princess. She then told us that Duke Seymour's condition has been improving rapidly during recent days. Instead of listening to her complaints, I decided to remind her of something.

"Your delegation's leader is finishing negotiations, so what does it matter if the duke starts asking questions? You have gained exclusive trading rights in the dwarven weapons, so why be afraid?"

The princess started blushing at my words, realizing that she had been acting overly fussy.

"I looked ugly again," she sighed, barely managing to shake off her anxiety. It seemed that the most beautiful rose was suffering through a spell of hardship, despite her virtues.

However, the hardships she now faced would only earn her greater rewards soon, and there was no reason why I couldn't remind her of this.

Meanwhile, a messenger came to announce that the king had arrived near the capital. Early in the morning, I headed out of the city gates and started to wait for the king.

“His Majesty and the Easter Legion!”

And finally, the king appeared on the plains. His now completely white hair was fluttering in the wind like a white lion’s mane, and behind him, he had the kingdom’s knights and champions.

No matter how majestic he looked, my heart continued pounding for no apparent reason.

I stood silently and waited for the king to arrive. And finally, the king and the Eastern Legion came before the city gate.

‘chuck~’

The Eastern Legion halted at once. The capital’s guards and knights who had been marching to meet them also stopped in place. In that world where everyone had stopped, only the king and I walked toward each other.

‘dup~ dup~ dup~’

Twenty yards; fifteen; ten; five- now three yards remained between us.

I then stopped walking.

However, the king did not stop, but the remaining three yards closed between us at a crawling pace even then.

And: ‘Warak,’ he embraced me.

Feeling that sudden warmth…

“Uh?” I could only voice out a stupid sound.

CHAPTER 216
IT WAS EMPTY, BUT IT WAS FULL (2)

I was panicking in that unexpected situation, and the king hugged me even harder. I couldn't do this, I couldn't do that, so I just wriggled my hands.

Then I relaxed my body; I could not resist.

The reason I stood still and accepted it was because I couldn't dare shove the king, who had just returned, away from me – that was the only reason, really.

And that's why I gently lifted my awkwardly hanging arms, knowing that if I acted all clumsy, it would feel awkward for the king. As I stretched out my arms and returned the hug, something snapped me awake: An unfamiliar scent penetrated my nose.

It was a dry scent I had already smelled in the north, the smell of medicine that was not completely covered by the smell of grime and dirt on the king's body.

'Shh~'

Just then, the king released his hands from their grip on my shoulders and withdrew.

"Good work. You did a really good job."

A sudden hug and no harsh words; these were all actions that the king would not have normally done. I wondered what it was all about, so I narrowed my eyes and looked at him.

His hair had become stark white after the queen's death, and wrinkles had taken over his face these past few years. His eyes were bright, but they conveyed a feeling of deep regret to me.

'Snf,' I smelled the air, my nostrils wide open.

A faint odor wafted over the smell of medicine.

“Ah…” I stiffened. “Are-”

“Your Highness,” someone called to me just as I was about to utter the question that filled my mind. He was the commander of the palace knights, Count Schmilde Stuttgart, who had served at the king’s side in the Empire. He shook his head quietly.

Not now, his sunken eyes were telling me.

“Let’s all go inside,” the king said as he grabbed my hand.

“Finally, my homage to his Majesty the King, who has returned safely from the campaign!”

“A homage to your Majesty the King and the victory of the Eastern Legion!”

While listening to the shouts of Maximilian and the kingdom’s nobles, knights, and soldiers, I merely followed the king.

* * *

“I have to take a break.”

After entering the capital and walking along the boulevard toward the palace, the king went straight to his residence. He used the excuse of being tired. Maximilian, the Great Marshal, Siorin: No one questioned the king’s behavior. It rather seemed to them that the king felt a bit exhausted after returning from his long campaign.

“Now that his Majesty is also back, the negotiations with Teuton will soon end.”

“You don’t know how reassured I am now that his Majesty has returned.”

As I listened to the conversation between the Marquis of Bielefeld and Siorin, I slipped to the back of the room.

“Brother?” Maximilian called to me as he noticed me departing like a ghost, but instead of answering him, I turned and left through the door. I then went straight to the king’s residence.

“Your Highness, his Majesty is tired from the long expedition and has asked to remain undisturbed in his rooms.”

The palace knights blocked me.

“Get out of my way. I came here because I have something to say to his Majesty.”

Even though the palace knights’ faces looked troubled, there was no sign that they would stop barring the way.

“His Majesty has commanded that no one is to- Your Highness!”

While the palace knights talked, I mobilized my mana and broke through their barrier, opening the door to the residence. Once inside, I saw the king sitting on his bed. He was undressed, and his body wrapped in pure white bandages. When the palace knights saw his body, they looked at me, amazed.

“Well, your Highness…”

I ignored them and walked straight to the maid who stood next to the king.

‘Quap,’ I roughly ripped the basket she held out of her hands and took off its lid.

The stench stabbed into my nose, and it was the very stench I had faintly smelled in front of the city gate. But it wasn’t the reek that mattered right now. Inside the basket were bandages covered in blackened blood and pus.

“Explain,” I turned my head toward the king, “What are these bandages, and why is there pus and dried blood on them?”

The white-faced king looked at me.

“What are you doing, harassing my beloved maid?” demanded the king, and contrary to what it sounded like in front of the gate, his voice was very hard and weary.

And the king, whose face was as worn as his voice, gestured with his hand.

“Everyone, leave us.”

As she heard his words, the maid hurriedly lowered her head and left the room as if fleeing. The palace knights at the entrance who looked unsure of themselves closed the door as they departed. During all that, I was watching the bandages wrapped tightly around the king’s body.

“How could you not be prepared to prevent yourself from being hurt in the middle of the enemy’s territory? The protectors who stood by your side should have been capable enough to prevent this.”

The king looked at me and asked in an embarrassed tone, “Do you wish that I was more prepared?”

“I’m surprised to see you looking like this.”

The king smiled gently, a smile that did not fit the context.

“The wound was a bit serious, but it’s getting better. So, there’s nothing to worry about.”

It was a lie that even a child wouldn’t believe in.

I had seen it with my own eyes: Bandages smeared with dried blood and black pus, secretions that would never flow from a wound that was healing. Such discharges were likely came from rotting, festering wounds.

“Sire…”

“There will not be even scars left, soon.”

“Sire.”

“So you don’t have to fuss about it anymore.”

“Sire!” I shouted in a voice that I did not know I had raised, yet the king did not raise an eyebrow.

“Many have died. Should they have closed their eyes forever while their king is screaming and moaning about his small wounds?”

As I looked at the king’s innocent face, a thousand curses rose from inside me. “It isn’t a small wound!” I cried out, no longer able to stand it.

“It is because I survived it. It’s enough for me to be back here.”

The king wanted me to believe that, because he had returned alive, he was merely

suffering cramps.

“Sire…”

“The journey was hard. I need to get some rest, so go out,” the king said and laid back on his bed, closing his eyes. And he soon began to breathe evenly. I stayed there for a while. Then, powerless to do anything else, I left the king’s bedside.

“Your Highness.”

When I left the room, I found the commander of the palace knights, Count Schmilde Stuttgart, waiting for me.

“I think it would be better for us to talk somewhere else.”

I asked Nogisa to follow me to my palace.

“From now on, let no one approach this area,” Nogisa ordered, and Carls Ulrich looked at me. When I nodded, Carls immediately led the palace knights and closed off my palace.

“Your Highness must know all too well that Sir Ulrich would be a good man to become the next commander of the palace knights,” Nogisa noted.

Under normal circumstances, I would’ve been glad to hear someone compliment my knight without hesitation, but not now. Instead of responding, I walked up to the door and locked it.

Then I asked Nogisa, “The Wyvern Knight clearly told me that his Majesty was safe. Did the Wyvern Knight lie to me?”

Jin Katrin had told me several times not to worry, as both the king and the Eastern Legion were in good condition. But the king, who Jin said was fine, could scarcely be touched, as he had returned with festering wounds. I had no choice but to think that Jin Katrin had lied to me.

“The Wyvern Knight did not lie. His Majesty’s injuries occurred only after the knight had left.”

The commander of the palace knights started explaining the situation to me with a

firm face.

He explained that, immediately after the First Imperial Princeps was killed, Leonberg and Dotrin's armies had already begun their withdrawal, judging that they had already exceeded their intended purpose. It was at that time that the emperor mobilized the elite army and knights serving under the imperial family. The strength of the imperial family's elite troops was not easy to face, and a fierce battle took place.

Nogisa then said that the Knights of the Sky and the King of Dotrin were able to open a way because of their awesome might, but a sudden change in circumstances forced the Knights of the Sky to fall away from Leonberg's main army.

"Information came to us that the imperial fleet, which had preserved itself from the fire dragon's carnage, was sailing, aiming to land an assault directed at the front lines of Leonberg. If they managed it, our Eastern Legion would become isolated in imperial territory."

The Imperial Army's tactics to forcefully damage the enemy by blocking off their retreat after drawing them deep into imperial territory remained unchanged. The strategy they had used four hundred years ago was still being used now.

"At once, the Sky Knights and the lords of Dotrin hurriedly fell away from the main army to stop the imperial fleet. If I had one wish, it is that the Wyvern Knights remained with our force. However, the Empire had already suffered enormous damage from the Wyvern Knights and was acutely aware of their existence."

"It was a trap."

"Your Highness's words are correct. Shortly after the Knights of the Sky left, the imperial offensive became even more intense."

It was as I had expected.

"We didn't expect that either, but it would've been impossible to return to the kingdom without ships, so we had to push through. It was a terrible battle. It is incredible that so many of our troops have returned alive."

The commander of the palace knights paused for a moment, then looked at me with a face filled with complex emotions.

“It would’ve been impossible without his Majesty’s presence.”

Nogisa’s eyes became distant.

* * *

The Imperial Army had begun their assault in the morning and were constantly beating against Leonberg’s army. Eventually, the situation became so dire that the king and the leaders gathered in the command tent.

“Sire! Now is the time to fall back!”

“We are surrounded by enemies! We can endure no more!”

The nobles were screaming. Horror filled their eyes as they watched Leonberg’s forces surrounding the command tent greeting the Imperial Army in a violent exchange of swords.

“Not yet!” the king bellowed, dismissing the nobles’ requests that were so close to frightened screams. “If we pull out now, our retreating rear will collapse! That’s what our enemies want!”

The king drew back his bowstring and released it.

‘Wheeik~’

The arrow flew toward an imperial knight who was battling a palace knight, and the imperial scrambled to lift his shield, blocking the arrow. It was, indeed, a very agile response by one of the Burgundy Imperial Family’s elite knights. The palace knight was also an elite warrior who had been born to wage war, however. The palace knight did not miss the opportunity and stabbed his sword into the imperial knight, who fell to the ground as blood gushed from him.

The king again drew back his bowstring, but just when he was about to loose another arrow, one of the nobles blocked his front and shouted, “Sire! The enemies are aiming for your Majesty, not our retreating allies! Only your Majesty does not know this!”

“The most important thing right now is not the firing of arrows to kill imperial knights!” another noble screamed.

No matter how urgent the situation was, such remarks crossed the line.

“Stop talking!” came the angry shout of Count Schmilde Stuttgart, commander of the palace knights, who had cut down two enemy knights who were pressing against the line with a single stroke of his sword. These nobles would normally retreat when faced with the cries of Nogisa, but not this time.

“If the king’s judgment is clouded, you should correct it, Count Stuttgart! Why are you just watching things unfold!”

On the contrary, one of the more powerful nobles came out and even rebuked Nogisa.

“Do you really want to die!” the old knight shouted, and the nobleman replied without missing a beat.

“I do this because I want to live! You still don’t know! If we go on like this, it means annihilation! How the hell can you not know it!”

Rather than arguing with the commander of the palace knights, the nobles were now shouting at the king. The king had been firing arrows without paying heed to the nobles’ uproar; he now lowered his bow.

“Peh! We have to fall back!” one of the nobles continued shouting, “ Otherwise, we all die! Our allies flee, and we’re all about to die!”

“No matter what, our main unit goes nowhere,” the king said as he looked at the shouting nobles. He said so in a terrifyingly dry voice.

“What does that mean?”

While the nobles frowned, finding the king’s words to be outrageous, the sound of a horn came from far away.

“Sire! That’s the sign that Count Willowden and the Templars have all safely left the battlefield!” Nogisa immediately reported to the king.

“Are there any stragglers?”

“Most have left the battlefield or are on the verge of leaving!”

The nobles interrupted, unable to bear the tension.

“Now, all that needs to be done is for your Majesty and us to flee!”

“If we wait, we all die!”

The king suddenly laughed coldly at the panicking nobles.

“That won’t be so bad.” The king’s voice was heard with exceptional clarity, even amid the noisy tumult.

“Huh, your Majesty?” “What are you saying?” the nobles asked the king with grim faces.

“I said it would better for you all to die rather than living and harming the kingdom.”

“Sire- I am not sure what the hell your Majesty is talking about.”

“You men think you’re innocent just because you still have your necks attached,” the king said in a frozen voice. “It would’ve been easy to take your heads as punishment for your sins, but then I would be creating hatred for the royal family in the hearts of talented young people who now live for Leonberg. I have saved you in the hope that the same people who now support the Crown Prince would not bear the sins of their fathers for all their lives.”

“Sire is now the time to be considering our past-”

“Let’s save ourselves! I’ll die if I stay here,” one of the nobles shouted and turned to flee – but he couldn’t take a single step. Nogisa and his palace knights had already surrounded the nobles.

“Rather than living and corrupting your children, rather than being executed, fight fiercely here. Then your children will be treated as loyal citizens.”

The nobles started shouting in greater fear.

“Don’t you see the Imperial Army in front of you now!”

“If we continue enduring this, your Majesty will not be safe!”

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” the king said as he looked at the nobles.

“In retrospect, my reign has been one of surrender and compromise. If my reign continues, opportunists like you will dominate Leonberg again. I am not suitable for the kingdom of light that my son will create.”

The king wasn’t about to flee.

“All I could do for my son was to sail away with those who sat like festering boils upon Leonberg.”

A great fervor burned in the king’s eyes, though he was outwardly calm.

“I and all of you will die here today for the future of Leonberg.”

CHAPTER 217
IT WAS EMPTY, BUT IT WAS FULL (3)

“Whosever heard of wishing for death?”

“I have no intention of dying here! How did I get here?!”

The nobles were all shouting in terror.

“What are you doing?! Go ahead and open the way for us!”

They pointed their swords at their soldiers, but these men were already locked in battle. There was nothing more they could do.

“All into battle! We cannot afford to care about this!”

The knights and soldiers could not afford to give any attention to their noble lords as they battled against the Imperial Army.

“Oh, I was stupid! I told the king I would value my freedom, and look where I am now!”

“Why are my troops, who should be in the rear, on the front lines, facing the Imperial Army?”

The nobles only then realized the truth of their situation and burst into cries of resentment. But by then, their troops had already been tricked into being deployed in front of the palace knights and the royal soldiers.

“Was it meant to be like this from the beginning?” one of the nobles asked the king with a despairing face. The palace knights became enraged by the tone of the nobles, who did not show even the least bit of respect toward the king of their country. The nobles had been shouting curses at the king over his willingness to let them die; they now shut their mouths as one.

However, it was impossible for that which was said to be unsaid, no matter what.

The palace knights were not about to let the nobles get away with forgetting to respect the king.

“Ouch!” The nobles screamed as they were beaten with the flats of blades, and they rolled to the ground. They had been reluctant to get dirt on their leather boots while wading across the mess of the battlefield; the nobles now quickly became mud-covered.

Not one of them complained about this because their biggest problem now wasn’t the fact that their clothes were getting dirty. The palace knights were beating the nobles with strong blows.

“That’s enough. Stop.”

If the king hadn’t spoken up at the right time, the nobles would truly have been beaten to death. They now stepped before the king, expressing their repentance and begging him for mercy. The king just stared at them – with the eyes of a man who watched a cow that would soon be slaughtered.

Then the king suddenly turned to the commander of the palace knights and said, “They seem to be having trouble serving their stupid monarch. How can I express my feelings of sorrow, and my gratitude at their excellent loyalty, in words?”

The king spoke in a friendly tone as if conversing with an old friend.

“But at this moment, instead of thanking these nobles for their loyalty, I’m going to ask you something, Nogisa. It will probably not be easy for you to accept, but you’re a knowledgeable man. Even though I know how hard this will be for you – I will still ask it.”

Nogisa had a bad feeling as he heard the king speak.

“My request comes in the form of a father’s desire for a competent knight to be at his son’s side. My request comes from the hopes and heart of a monarch who does not wish precious talent to pass away needlessly.”

The king spoke on, without giving Nogisa the chance to answer.

“Right now, I want you to take the surviving palace knights and troops from the battlefield. Then, join the Templars and get to the fleet. Do not leave even one soldier

behind. Lead them so that they can safely return to their families. And…"

The king stopped talking, suddenly sighing."

"That child… Ian must understand."

A complex emotion arose in the eyes of the king as he stopped talking.

It seemed to be regret in some way, and in other moments, it was as if he was proud. And in a certain light, it seemed to be both feelings at once. Nogisa watched the shifting expression of the king and ordered the palace knights, "All of you, simultaneously gather the remaining troops and leave the battlefield."

The palace knights affirmed the orders of their aged commander without hesitation.

"Hurry," Nogisa urged the knights.

'chuck~'

The palace knights brought their legs together and beat their chests with their fists.

"All glory to your Majesty the King. All luck to the champion of Leonberg."

Their salute may have been short and crude, but the respect contained therein was real. After the palace knights had expressed their courtesy, they began leading the escape from the battlefield at once. Yet, some of the knights did not follow them and now took off their helmets.

All of them were old knights; all of them had gray hair.

"Now only the sludge remains."

"Ech! I'm still a lively young buck. It'll take thirty imperial knights to bring me down."

"You want to bet? Let's see who takes more of them, me or you."

"Not a bad offer. You got a deal."

The old knights spoke light-hearted words that did not match their weary faces. They didn't seem to be embarrassed by their actions. The whole process was as

natural as flowing water – as if they had talked about it in advance.

“While everyone is retreating, these knights will spread out and let our soldiers escape with their lives. These knights were birthed from tough seeds, your Majesty, so some of these old dogs may yet survive and leave the battlefield. Perhaps some of them will be forced to surrender to the Empire – either way, someone has to stay behind and force the imperials to at least crap their armor before gaining their victory,” the commander of the palace knights explained, in an embarrassed tone, why the old knights would not be fleeing the battle.

“Have I not told you that Ian needs an excellent knight like you!” the king shouted, only then snapping awake from his vacant state and taking a step toward Nogisa.

“I am grateful, from the depth of my heart, that your Majesty values me so, but there are already many excellent knights at his Highness the Crown Prince’s side. So, if a few old knights disappear, will it really leave a mark?”

And Nogisa wasn’t just saying that – there were many outstanding knights in the service of the multi-talented prince. And not only were they skilled with the sword, but they were also thoughtful and resolute when it came to dealing with others. There was no shortage of knights in Leonberg who encompassed the skills needed to serve a regent.

Bale Balahard had identified the Crown Prince’s talent and had even been embarrassed by the fact that he had once decided not to take Prince Adrian on as his disciple.

The eldest son of the Eli family had been frowned upon in the past but proved himself, having hidden his family’s swordsmanship, once called the greatest knight family of Leonberg.

There were the knights of Balahard from the north. Even if they had not been able to reach completion, their swords and spirits had been honed against the orcs, forging them into a class of warriors that were rare in the world. Nogisa told all of this to the king.

“Besides, your Majesty, if you’re worried about my successor, there is someone who is good enough. His skill with the sword has not yet reached the level of those knights I had just mentioned, but given his sincerity and talent, I assure you that

sooner or later, he will also gain the title of champion."

The old knight then trembled, asking that, since there were so many excellent knights by the prince's side, if it would be okay for him to remain beside the person he had originally served.

"You've already decided on it," the king said with a resigned face.

The king reminded himself of the nature of Nogisa, who would never turn back once he made up his mind.

"As your Majesty has already determined your will, so too have I. However, I am a narrow-minded old man without the great will your Majesty holds in your heart. All I did was to make up my mind to stay beside the person I served and be his knight to the end."

The king clucked his tongue as he heard Nogisa's words.

"It's a sad sight. I can't break through your stubbornness, so I'll be remembered as a reckless king who jumped into the fire and led valuable knights to their doom."

"I will also be remembered as a foolish knight who could not properly support his master, so there is comfort in that, your Majesty."

The king laughed as he heard the old knight's joke.

"A stupid king and a foolish knight…" The king repeated these same words over and over again as if he very much liked the sound of them.

In the meantime, the battle was approaching its end. The nobles' enlisted soldiers had fiercely blocked the Imperial Army; few of them now remained. The nobles took notice of this and started to step back.

"Where are you going?"

White-haired palace knights blocked off these nobles.

"Although all of our bodies are old, we will stop you. You nobles seem to be heading the wrong way."

“Wouldn’t it be better to die fiercely while fighting your enemies rather than die in disgrace under friendly swords?” the king asked as his fingers stroked his bowstring.

“Since I came to the Empire, my bow has become one with my hands. If I shoot forty arrows from the distance that you stand from me, only one of those arrows will miss, while all the others will pierce in between your eyebrows. If you are willing to test my skill, then run away or kneel before the enemy.”

The king’s tone was calm, but the words he spoke were a clear threat. The nobles became panicked; they had the Imperial Army in front of them, and the king and his palace knights at their backs.

No word better suited the nobles’ positions than ‘dilemma.’

‘Shh~’

Nogisa had been watching quietly this entire time; and now he gave a significant glance at the nobles. The white-haired knights saw his glance and suddenly started to prod the nobles’ backs with the tips of their swords.

“Ahhh!”

The nobles screamed as if they were all being killed on the spot.

“Oh. I didn’t know these blokes weren’t wearing armor.”

“Swords and arrows have no eyes, so it doesn’t matter if armor is heavy and hot.”

The palace knights spoke casually as they again stabbed the tips of their swords at the nobles’ backs, and those backs quickly became bloody.

“Fight. Die and become food for Leonberg. Some of the giant trees that will absorb your nutrients will be your own children,” the king said coldly, and the nobles still screamed. They seemed to have no intention of drawing the swords buckled at their waists.

‘chuck~’

And at that moment, the imperial army had taken care of all the enlisted soldiers and surrounded the remaining Leonbergians, pointing their spears and swords at them.

“King of Leonberg now surrender!” an imperial knight shouted in poor Leonbergian as he stepped forward, recommending surrender. The king didn’t respond to him. Instead, he silently knocked an arrow and aimed it at the imperial knights, who lifted their shields.

‘Pot~’

The king suddenly turned his head back, and the arrowhead he had aimed at the knights now found another target.

‘Woodantang~’

A nobleman who was running toward the imperial army with his hands raised rolled to the ground mid-run as the arrow pierced into his back. The other nobles flinched, and their feet grew heavy at once. The king looked at them with a cold face and then again drew back his bowstring.

And without a single moment’s hesitation, he aimed at the imperial knights and released the arrow.

‘Weedge~’

The arrow flew through the air and pierced into an imperial knight’s flesh.

“…!” an imperial knight said something, but the king paid it no heed as he fired another arrow.

“…!”

The imperial knights shouted angrily as arrows pierced flesh or bounced from shields. It was then that the imperial troops who had held back after encircling the Leonbergians began to advance, their swords and spears at the ready.

And there was a battle – the nobles who had tried to survive until the end faced the imperial knights first.

“Agh! Save me! Nooo!”

“If you spare me, I am willing to pay a huge ransom- Kraahnge!”

Without even thinking of drawing their swords, without a modicum of pride, the nobles suffered deaths that were not worthy of the lowliest soldier. Next came the palace knights.

“It was an honor to serve Your Majesty!”

“I will go ahead and wait! I will atone for the sins that I have lived with all my life there!”

“Long live the Leonberger family!”

The old knights had been stabbed and cut by swords and spears dozens of times, yet did not let go of their swords to the end as they fell one by one, not one of them surviving. All who remained was the king and the commander of the palace knights.

“Do you want to change your mind, even now?” the king asked.

“It’s too late,” answered Nogisa, and dozens of imperial knights let their sword auras blaze.

“Stay behind me,” Nogisa asked the king, and sliced his sword out in a silver trajectory, and many imperial knights fell to the ground, spewing blood.

However, one hand cannot block ten hands, and Nogisa soon became a bloodied man.

“I am Schmilde Stuttgart! I am a champion of Leonberg and his Majesty’s knight!” Nogisa shouted as he ripped off his hanging breastplate and pauldrons and fixed his sword again.

At that time, three knights with intense energy emerged from the rear of the Imperial Army.

They were paladins. The paladins drew their swords, and Nogisa extended his blade, welcoming them.

The old knight did not step back as the paladins met him; he fought on without hesitation.

When Nogisa showed no signs of retreating, the imperial paladins shouted something while they fanned out. They raised their energy, and only then did Nogisa

start stepping back.

In that instant, ten of the Empire's knights stepped forward. Realizing their intentions, the old knight swung his sword desperately while facing the paladins, but they persisted in holding him away from the king. The sword strikes of Nogisa became a dizzying flurry, and his wounds sharply increased.

Tears in the fabric of his flesh weren't what was important now, though. Nogisa met the paladins' swords while his eyes tracked the king.

King Lionel let loose an arrow, and one of the imperial knights died as the missile pierced through the eye slit of his helm. The remaining nine knights avoided the king's arrows, however, and managed to reach his position. The king abandoned his bow and drew his sword.

"I am the King of the Leonberg Kingdom!" the king shouted as he vigorously swung his blade.

The imperial knights batted his sword away with ease and started poking their own blades at the king, toying with him, having a joke. The king quickly became bloody.

'Qaup~'

A knight's sword pierced into the king's shoulder. The king reached out and grabbed the blade, and the imperial knight snorted as he started pulling his sword out. The king did not let go of the blade, however. The embarrassed imperial knight then gripped his sword with both hands, and it was at that moment that the king raised his own sword and rushed at the knight.

The imperial knight's sword had been halfway out of the king's shoulder; it now stuck back in deeply. The king's sword sliced into the knight's throat.

'Dump~'

The imperial knight grabbed his neck as it spouted blood, and he fell to the ground, kneeling.

"…!"

Until then, knights had stabbed their swords at the king without sincerity, as if they

were making the king dance; they now spewed their anger.

“Sire!” Nogisa shouted as he saw sword auras bloom on the edges of the knights’ swords. The paladins struck at Nogisa, and instead of blocking their fatal blows, Nogisa managed to dodge back. He hit the ground running, heading to where his king was.

The strikes of the paladins’ had sliced across Nogisa’s back and had torn into his flanks. Nevertheless, the old man barged into the imperial knights surrounding the king, striking out with his sword. He only managed to cut down three of them, however.

Four swords had pierced into the king’s body – through his shoulder, thigh, stomach, and side.

The king vomited dark blood yet lifted his sword and slid it into a knight’s neck. The other imperial knights twisted their swords viciously, and when they pulled them out, the king’s wounds bloomed open like bloody flowers in an instant.

And even then, the king rushed at the imperial knights.

“Gluchk- Me, I am the King of Leonberg!” the king exclaimed as he retched blood. Another knight fell to his sword, and Nogisa cut down all the remaining knights.

‘Sqwaak~’

An eerie sound broke into Nogisa’s ears, then. He widened his eyes as he looked at the king. A cold blade protruded from the center of the king’s chest. And behind the king stood a traitor noble of Leonberg.

“I was supposed to die? I struggled to make it look ugly, and it was easy to go down… Sire.”

The king turned around, looking at the man behind him.

“The only arrow shot at me today was yours, and it brushed past my vitals.”

When the king saw the owner of the voice, he lamented, moaned.

The aristocrat had been lying flat in a pile of corpses before he had suddenly stabbed

his sword into the king's back, and he now openly ridiculed the monarch.

Then the noble suddenly looked at the imperial army and cried out, "I'll take the king's head and come to you! Don't hurt me!"

However, before the man could even pull out the sword that had pierced through the king's body, Nogisa arrived.

"Now, wait-"

The nobleman's head was separated from his neck, and he was unable to finish his excuse.

"Sire!"

Nogisa closed the short distance between himself and the king, helping the monarch to steady himself.

"I should rather be glad… their swords were aimed at me, and not my son."

The king's laughter did not fit the situation, and his laughter quickly became a bloody cough.

'Hwaaa~'

The king's body had collapsed.

CHAPTER 218
IT WAS EMPTY, BUT IT WAS FULL (4)

“Sire!”

The old knight supported the king’s crumbling body.

“Sire! Sire!”

“Gwaalgh,” the king vomited blood. “I have only reached this far, and that was all thanks to the sword of the one who has served me. This can be called the end of a foolish king.”

“No will be able to say your Majesty’s courageous stand was foolish. You fought really well. You fought more valiantly than any knight.”

“I don’t like the words that come from my mouth. Now, I want to believe in your words. If there is just one wish, I hope that my son will think the same as you. This is the moment his incompetent father dies,” the king said.

Nogisa clenched his teeth as he saw the king baring his emotions.

“His Highness will be proud of your Majesty, prouder than anyone else,” Nogisa told the king, pretending that everything was fine. The king suddenly looked at the sky.

“I miss her.”

“The queen will also be proud of her Majesty,” Nogisa said as he saw the king’s slick, bloody smile.

“I don’t expect her to be. She would tell me I have neglected to polish my archery. She will give me that look of hers, telling me that if I were a better shot, I would’ve been more fortunate.”

The deeper the emotions contained in the king’s voice became, the more it faded. And in the end, it was no longer heard.

“Sire! Sire!”

Nogisa was terrified as he called out to the king.

King Lionel opened his closed eyes.

“Please raise me up. I don’t want to face my end while being propped up in someone else’s arms,” the king said as he shook, waking up.

King Lionel managed to stand and straighten his back with the aid of Nogisa. He then lifted his sword and pointed it at the Imperial Army.

“I will be with you.” Nogisa stood by the king’s side.

The paladins of the Empire stumbled back as they met the eyes of such wounded beasts. Instead of attacking, they beckoned other troops closer. The imperial archers who had formed up behind them raised their bows at once.

“I’m sorry. If you had met a competent monarch, you would have been well known to the world.”

“Don’t say that. I met a king who I would truly follow anywhere. And since I have been with you for decades, I have been able to keep my side of the bargain until the end.”

The old knight looked at the king with tears in his eyes. The blood from his back ran down his thighs and onto the ground.

‘Schlk~ Schlk~’

Nogisa spread his legs over the pool of blood before raising his sword.

‘Tscchk~’

The imperial archers released their bowstrings. As Nogisa watched the black rain of flying arrows, he blew his very soul into the edge of his sword. Then he swung it with all the strength that remained within him. His energy pierced through the sky and severed dozens of arrows mid-air in their descent.

There were still hundreds of arrows in the sky, however.

“Sire, I will go ahead and wait.”

The old knight, knowing that the end had come, embraced the king. As Nogisa faced the descending storm of arrows, his eyes widened. Right then- ‘Qshawahhh!’

There came a great frenzy as hundreds of arrows were swept away by a violent wind, as they were diverted and scattered in all directions. And- ‘Qshaw shahhh!’

Something huge fell over the Imperial Army with a great roar – like a fierce thunderbolt, like a sharpened spear. Dirt rose up into the air. In that sudden, surprising moment, the old knight gave strength to his eyes.

‘Grrraa~’

The sound of something giving a throaty growl came through the dust.

‘Aahhh!’

A terrible scream then followed.

‘Shaah~’

Another gust of wind blew, and the thick dust was swept away by it. Nogisa’s eyes widened, for he could not believe the sight that was unfolding in front of him. A paladin, the Empire’s pride, was flying through the air, stuck on a lance.

‘Kreee!’ cried a giant beast with an imperial soldier clenched in its jaws. Wyvern- It was the fiercest and most gigantic among Dotrin’s wyverns.

“Tchu. Somehow, I knew things didn’t feel right.”

The wyvern’s rider, the King of Dotrin, clucked his tongue.

“…!”

The Imperial Army only snapped awake when they saw the sudden appearance of Dotrin’s lord, and they pointed their swords and spears at him. Cautiously, the two paladins who had been spared by the aerial assault raised their swords and surrounded the wyvern.

The King of Dotrin didn't seem to care about them, however.

"…!" The paladins' pride was hurt, and they all rushed in. They could only take five steps before coming to a halt, however. At their feet, there was a thick line drawn over the ground, and they didn't know when it had appeared.

"Don't cross that line." The King of Dotrin gave an indifferent glance at the paladins, then said to Nogisa, "The warlocks are coming. So try to bear with me for a little bit. I have spiritual gems with healing magic, but they won't be helpful at all."

The imperial paladin skewered on the tip of the lance spasmed a few times, still alive.

"Are you sure you came to save us? His Majesty's wounds are serious. Why didn't the returning wizards come with you? Where are the other reinforcements?"

Nogisa, fully alert, spoke quickly.

"I thought you were a silent man, but it seems you aren't. Doris alone is enough to talk my ears off," the King of Dotrin said with a groan, frowning.

"First answers first. I didn't have a good feeling, so I hurried back here. Dotrin's wizards are coming. Our warlocks use spirits in their healing magic, but that'll enough to take immediate emergency measures."

"Where are the reinforcements? Did you come alone?" Nogisa asked.

The King of Dotrin laughed and revealed the truth.

"The reinforcements are here with you, of course."

He then placed his lance under his armpit, fixing it in place, and started searching through his pockets with his left hand. He searched back and forth. His relaxed attitude quickly changed. As he looked down upon the world from his wyvern, his eyes began rolling.

'Shh~'

Then the hand that had been groping through his chest pockets gripped onto his lance again.

“This is my companion.”

It was said in a manly tone, but it was a poor excuse to tell the old man, especially as the King of Dotrin had forgotten to bring a most important thing.

“…!” the King of Dotrin shouted to the Empire’s knights in fluent True Imperial, avoiding the old knight’s gaze. Several imperial knights started laughing.

“Well, that doesn’t work either,” the king mused.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“In fact, I had an important object that would end this battle. I don’t have it with me, so the Empire’s lads don’t believe me.”

Nogisa asked what it was, so the King of Dotrin answered him in an anguished tone.

“The war is over. The Empire conceded defeat, promised to pay enormous reparations, and surrendered territories along the border so that their forces could return home.”

Nogisa’s eyes widened as if being torn open.

“I heard that the Crown Prince pressured the third princeps to approve a humiliating peace treaty. And the document of that agreement was borrowed for a while by a Wyvern Knight, who brought it to me. The Burgundy imperial troops who had been deployed to attack your returning fleet looked at the seal stamped on the treaty and turned their ships back, so the agreement is authentic. Without any doubt,” the King of Dotrin told Nogisa with a bitter taste in his mouth.

“But the problem we now face is that I have left the agreement with someone else. I was in such a hurry that I did not bring it along.”

“What the hell do you mean…” Nogisa asked, almost laughing, so great was anger.

“Well, it’s not really a big problem,” the King of Dotrin said with a bloody grin, “Until my knights bring the agreement, I will stop them, even if I have to stop them myself.”

It was that moment that the imperial troops, who had been mustering enough courage to attack, rushed in as they shouted.

"…!"

"Stay right here. If you're somewhere else, something with a dirty temper will try to eat you," the King of Dotrin said as a humorous smile played across his lips.

Nogisa could never think of the situation as being funny, however. A tremendous energy suddenly erupted around Nogisa, and the energy became flowing air, and the air started blowing as wind.

'Qshaw ahhh!'

The raging wind turned into a frenzied tornado, and that became a great tempest.

"I'll be back."

Nogisa heard the voice exceptionally clearly even amid that mighty wind.

And at that moment, the storm swept into the Imperial Army.

'Aaaargh!'

Screams and shouts could be heard in the wind. And all the while, someone was laughing insanely. Nogisa had no time to think about who that was. He desperately squeezed the remaining energy from his rings in order not to get caught up in the storm. He embraced the drooping king with both hands.

'Kwsha~ Gsha~ Gshak~'

The storm, which was unlikely to last forever, slowly began to subside. The screams, pleas, and laughter were no longer heard.

And finally, when everything was over, Nogisa saw a field scattered with lumps of flesh that had been torn into dozens, hundreds of pieces – and the king's wyvern, which stood in the middle of heaps of twisted and warped pieces of bloody iron.

The wyvern looked like an apex predator, and the man atop it, more so. Looking at that satisfied face, Nogisa wondered if the king had intentionally forgotten to bring the treaty.

The surviving imperial troops were terrified. They retreated. The King of Dotrin

glanced at the fleeing imperials with a bored face, as if he had seen everything there was to see.

“The warlocks you’ve been waiting for have come.”

The king then suddenly lifted the tip of his bloody lance and pointed at the sky.

Nogisa threw his head back as he looked up.

One hundred wyverns were hovering over the battlefield.

‘Dukuduku~ Dukuduku~’

One instant later, Nogisa heard the sound of horses’ hooves thundering over the earth.

He shifted his eyes as he followed that sound and saw hundreds of mounted figures and thousands of infantry running in from a distance – flapping the black lion banner of the Templar Knights.

* * *

“Dotrin’s warlocks had the ability to blow a lungful of life into his Majesty at that moment, but they could not completely heal his wounds.”

Nogisa sighed, saying that the abominable wound the traitor noble gave the king had been the worst of all.

“His Majesty was unable to regain consciousness for a long time. After seeing this, Dotrin’s monarch said that the wounds were not the problem, but rather the fact that his Majesty had no will to continue with his life.”

I closed my eyes tightly, and old memories quickly came into my mind and then disappeared.

The king had aged rapidly from how he had been several years ago. Everyone had been concerned about this, especially when he had started to act energetically.

I had also been worried.

But I thought it was not so bad, as it seemed to be that the weakness and incompetence I had first seen in the king had been burned away by the fires of his newfound purpose.

However, it seemed that the fireworks that had raged within the king had been created by him squeezing out the last remaining spirit and determination that had existed in his soul.

Perhaps the king had lived so passionately to await the moment when he could take the traitor nobles down with him while fighting the Empire – waiting for when he would add the firewood of his life to the queen's flames. And when he had finally achieved that purpose, there would be nothing left for him – no willingness to sustain his life, no regrets in accepting death.

"Fuck."

I could only swear.

'From here on out, this fight is for me alone as the Veil of Winter.'

'Someone needs to remain and take care of this mess. The difficult work, I leave to you, nephew.'

The last conversation I had with my uncle ran through my head.

Just remembering it reminded me of my helplessness at that time, and my insides boiled. My heart felt as if it was plunging into the depths of sorrow while I so clearly remembered the appearance of my uncle and the last goodbye he had given me.

The figure of the king in his bandages became superimposed over those painful memories.

The dark shadow of death that was circling the eyes of the aging king fluttered before my eyes.

Perhaps if the king died, he would also become one of my burdens. Like the death of my uncle. Like the queen's death. Like the death of the half-elves.

"Everyone is on their own in this world. Yet, I don't even think about myself… So anxious am I about all the burdens I fail to bear."

After I spoke such nervous words, Nogisa continued the tale as if he hadn't heard anything.

"In any case, we owe a lot to Dotrin this time. It is thanks to Dotrin's monarch that we were able to escape from the Imperial Army and that his Majesty, who had been unconscious, regained consciousness."

"After you were freed from the Imperial Army, what made his Majesty regain his consciousness?"

I didn't dare to even guess. I knew that a few words couldn't reignite the flame of a candle that had reached its end, with even its wick being all burned out.

"I don't know in detail. I can only guess that his Majesty woke up after Dotrin's king whispered something into his ear."

Unfortunately, the old man said he knew nothing. I tried to clear up the questions swirling in my mind. Right now, it didn't matter what the descendant of the Sky Blade had said to the king.

"How much time is left for his Majesty?"

The Nogisa became very reluctant as he heard my question. It seemed that he did not want to mention the end of the person whom he had served. I persuaded Nogisa that I needed to know how much time remained so that I could prepare for the future.

And after a long time, Nogisa managed to tell me that the time remaining to the king would not exceed four months.

"Good. Okay."

After hearing this general estimate, I asked Nogisa to retire from my palace. Instead of leaving, he knelt in front of me and started begging that I punish him for not protecting his master.

So, I asked him who had kept the king alive. I asked him who had committed the sin of harming the king. The old man, his shoulders drooping, left my room immediately after saying his goodbyes.

As I looked at Nogisa leaving, I thought about it all. I wasn't sure, but if the king's

condition did not improve, it was clear that the old knight would not be able to overcome his own guilt.

That wasn't what I was hoping for.

According to the king's own words, Nogisa was a valuable talent who should continue to devote himself to the kingdom. I didn't want to see such a talented man break his sword while watching his master die. And I also did not want another member of the Leonberger family to be dying of wounds inflicted by the Empire.

And all the time, I hoped that the kingdom would remain intact until it finally regained its former glory. I didn't hope this due to the promise I had made to my ancient friend – my heart just wanted it. It didn't matter to me from what kind of mind the idea had originated; all that was important was for me to possess the means to achieve the goal.

"Gunn."

When I whispered her name, the half-elf suddenly appeared.

"The Elven swordsingers are staying in the outer keep of the palace."

Gunn stared at me.

"Go there and find the High Elf."

The half-elf frowned with those fine eyebrows of hers, then softly spoke.

"High Elves never talk to half."

At her words, I responded by saying that the lesser High Elf would not dare dismiss a messenger I had sent due to his arrogance. He was a guy who hadn't even achieved his purpose of paying off the elves' debts by serving me, for the war had suddenly ended. He would be very eager to make contact with me by now.

"I don't have much time, so I have to ask you to do it right now."

I grabbed Gunn's arm before she left.

"Don't be overwhelmed just because his pedigree is not the same as yours," I urged

Gunn, adding, “Don’t forget that I’m always behind you.”

Gunn widened her eyes as she looked at me. Then she bowed her head and quickly left the room.

I was left alone with my thoughts of the king on his bed.

“He is leaving to me everything I wanted,” I scoffed. I never thought about seeing the day – and I was certain that I had to prevent it.

That is why I had decided that I had to make the irresponsible king live and fulfill his responsibilities. To achieve that, the High Elf had to come. To be precise, that wasn’t all I was waiting for: An arrogant High Elf that had not yet fully reached maturity. No…

Even the noblest of faeries were only allowed one of it – Nectar.

It is the elixir of knightly rebirth. If you breathe in only a lungful of it, you can regain your lion’s pace even if you lie upon the threshold of death. This was the identity of the thing I so eagerly awaited.

“His age is past the age when High Elves get their Nectar.”

And I knew that this was the first outing into the world for the foolish High Elf.

“How convenient that fact is,” I murmured to myself as I started to draw conclusions about the situation.

Perhaps Arnand’s Nectar had been included from the beginning among the gifts sent by the elves who wanted to improve their relationship with me.

Of course, even if the High Elf didn’t know how scary the world was, he still knew he was an elf, so he might not agree with me at all.

CHAPTER 219
IT WAS EMPTY, BUT IT WAS FULL (5)

There was still some time left before the high elf would arrive at the palace.

Meanwhile, I had gone to the king again. I was concerned that he would refuse to meet with me, but he readily allowed me to enter.

“Did you come?”

The king, sitting by the window, basking in the sun, smiled gently and greeted me.

It felt more awkward than welcoming because the king’s gentleness seemed like the last warmth given to those who he would leave behind.

“Come and sit here.”

Without knowing what I was there for, the king gestured to me with a smile.

I sat down and looked around for a while.

The cold days were all gone, and the sun was warm, but a fire was burning in the king’s hearth. The clothing he wore was of fur and would be better suited for the middle of winter. Even in those furs, the king’s shoulders shook, as if he was freezing.

“I heard everything from Maximilian.”

It seemed that Maximilian had been here and that the king knew everything.

“You did a great job. No matter who else there could have been in your position, they wouldn’t have done it better than you did.”

I shook my head when I heard the king’s words. I had no desire to speak of the public good and the victory we had all achieved together. The purpose of my visit to the king was not to be praised either.

“Sire.”

“Tell me.”

“Show me the wound.”

The king became hardened as he heard my request.

“I told you it’s nothing major.”

However, he quickly corrected his expression and uttered his lies with a casual face.

“Then there is no reason not to show it to me if you will recover.”

“The court wizard has already looked at the wound. What does it help if you look at it, you who have no skill in medicine?”

“I might have no medicinal skills, but when it comes to war – I’ve almost grown tired of it. I’ve seen a lot of soldiers who could not heal their wounds in time, with the affected areas starting to rot.”

“That means that those that fought for our kingdom did not receive treatment in time. That was also due to my immorality, my ineptness. Immediately order the Great Marshal to do his best in making sure the survivors are healed and let him take practical measures for the victims-”

“Sire,” I interrupted the king in all seriousness, “in this room, right now, there hangs an odor which seems to have come straight from the battlefield.”

Then I said it outright.

“That odor comes from your Majesty’s body, where the affected area rots.”

“I know you have been through a lot of wars, which is not appropriate for one of your age, but I didn’t know you were able to learn the difficult trick of examining wounds only by smelling them, not seeing them.”

The king kept up his pretense until the end. If it went on like this, we would be arguing all day, and I would not be able to check the affected area.

“Sire,” I said as I looked up.

“I am the king of this country.”

“I know, but I need to know your Majesty’s condition so that I can be prepared.”

The king shut his mouth when I said such a radical thing. In the past, he would have driven me out with a yell, but not now. The king looked at me for a while, then suddenly sighed.

“Is it something you heard from Sir Schmilde?”

“I confirmed it when I saw the bandages that had covered the wound.”

The king sighed again at my answer.

“If you’ve already heard it all, then why do you ask me to show my wounds to you now?”

“That’s the only way how I can be prepared.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, as sufficient steps have been taken to ensure that your path, your journey, will not be dizzying.”

I frowned. What kind of wacky talk was this? I only then saw the king’s wrinkled face and the complex emotions that emerged on it. There were slight regret and anger – and an even deeper remorse mixed with self-hatred. It was only after seeing those gloomy feelings that I realized that the king had misunderstood my words. He apparently thought I was talking about the succession to the throne. Otherwise, there would have been no way that he would’ve looked at me with such a terrible expression.

“It’s not that kind of preparation. It’s preparation for your treatment.”

I immediately corrected his misunderstanding.

“It is the sword that that snake of a noble pierced through me with all his hatred. I believe all of his resentment and poison has permeated into my bone marrow. It’s too late to turn back.”

“It’s not too late. If breath still exists within the body, there is an elixir that can save even those whose hearts were pierced.”

“I haven’t heard of any such drugs.”

“Because it’s not a human medicine.”

I explained about the drug the High Elves called Nectar.

“Is it easy for you to get such a precious medicine?” asked the king after hearing all my explanations.

“I have to get it for you.”

My job was to bake and boil a High Elf who possessed a peculiar arrogance, but the guy hadn’t lived nearly the amount of years that I have lived.

The king smiled.

“Hey, you are the one who made a princeps of an arrogant Empire comply with a humiliating peace treaty, so it would be possible,” the king said, but I didn’t see hope in his eyes.

I thought that maybe he didn’t believe in the efficacy of Nectar, so I was about to explain it to him again. The king looked at me and said, “It’s not that I don’t believe you. If you say it, it must be true. I believe the effects will be no different from what you said.”

“Then why-”

“It is a treasure that will be wasted on me,” the king said, staring at me. “From the war in the north to the one in the Empire – I know how you fought and won.”

I frowned. Seeing me do so, the king continued to talk.

“It’s a common occurrence for you to get injured, and there were quite a few times when you’ve been brought in unconscious because of serious injuries. I also heard that all your scars disappeared due to some mysterious harmony when you reached the level of Master. But now that I look at you, your whole body is again full of scars.”

Instinctively, I looked at my body – and I was amazed.

“When did this-”

There was no unscarred place on the back of my hands, my forearms, on every patch of exposed skin – and all after my scars had disappeared neatly when my body was reconstructed with my ascent to Master.

“Now that I look at it, I wandered the battlefields without knowing the damage my body was taking.”

The king clucked his tongue. Then, “Because you are as you are, you will need more of that Nectar,” he told me to save the elixir of knightly rebirth for myself.

He spoke words I would never have even thought of.

“I’ve already made up my mind, so don’t press this anymore.”

The king gestured as he looked at me blankly.

It meant that I had to leave him.

* * *

I visited the king several times and tried to persuade him, but he persisted in his stubbornness to the end. All the king did was look at me and smile, as if he was proud of himself for conceding a treasure to me that anyone would covet. He was dying, day by day.

“Now is not the time to worry about others!”

I went crazy after a while and shouted, but his resistance showed no signs of abating.

“Let’s get the Nectar first.”

I eventually gave up trying to persuade him and decided to finish with the acquisition of the Nectar.

And after that, if the king still refused to be treated, I would force-feed him the medicine. It was then that Gunn returned, and the High Elf was with her.

“I, Arnand, High Elf of the Mistletoe Clan, greets his Highness Adrian Leonberger, Prince of the Leonberg Kingdom.”

His words were polite, but his face displayed one that was full of dissatisfaction.

I didn’t know if it was because he had not liked the lodgings of the fortress he had been sent to, or if he didn’t like how I treated him by sending a half-elf as the messenger.

It seemed to be the latter reason, for as Arnand’s gaze passed me by, hatred instantly flared up in his eyes – as if he was looking at something filthier than dirt.

I turned and saw that Gunn’s expression was somewhat stiff. When I met her eyes, she bowed her head and looked down. I felt like I knew what had happened.

The arrogant High Elf must have been offended by her lineage and treated her harshly. Even knowing that she was my messenger, he must have insulted her.

(Sorry) Gunn gestured in sign language, her head still bowed.

I sighed. She had done nothing wrong.

If someone was in the wrong, it was me who had sent her as a messenger while knowing that she held an instinctive fear of High Elves in her heart. After all, Gunn had been bred and kept by the Elder High Elf Sigrun, so the fault was mine for not really figuring out how great the fear was in her heart.

(I’m Really Sorry) she gestured again.

“No. Nothing to be sorry about. Good work.”

Instead of getting angry, I quietly patted her on the shoulder. I could never be angry with her, realizing what great courage it took for her and the other half-elves to stand against Sigrun for my sake.

“It’s okay to go now.”

Gunn, head still bowed, left the room.

“Tcha.”

While I looked at her retreating back, I heard the sound of someone clucking their tongue in displeasure. I turned my head. The High Elf, a kid who didn't yet know the world, was looking in the direction in which Gunn had departed – with a gaze filled with hatred and contempt.

The moment I saw those eyes, I made up my mind: For him, a fair trade will not be enough.

"Woo," I let out a long breath. Even if only a little, the heat boiling within me cooled.

"Have you been comfortable during your stay?" I asked the High Elf in a formal tone after having calmed down.

"All the time, I felt your Highness's consideration and goodwill in almost every way – except for the savage dwarves living so close by."

When I heard how he thanked me for my consideration and goodwill, it seemed that the elves had suffered many difficulties, and it was natural.

If the Noble High Elf had found it comfortable to live in a tent in a courtyard, that would've been strange. Moreover, the dwarves also stayed there, but they lived in the fortress and daily mocked the elves, having no qualms about treating them severely.

Even though I had heard Arnand's complaint, I pretended not to.

"I am glad that you have found your lodgings to be adequately comfortable. It must have been inconvenient when the war suddenly ended."

Arnand's original purpose had been to change my mind, as I held a grudge against the elves due to Sigrun. Arnand was to pay off these debts by aiding us in war.

He had lost that opportunity when the war suddenly ended, however. There was no way that the guy's mind could be at ease, having failed the mission given to him on his first outing.

"There is no way for such an event to inconvenience me. I was delighted with the kingdom's victory as if it was the victory of my own family."

I obviously knew his situation, but he pretended that everything was fine. I didn't want to wait a long time for the crafty faerie to take off his pretense, however, so I

got to the point immediately.

“Is it true that the High Elves want to enter diplomacy with our kingdom?”

“To be precise, rather than a relationship with the kingdom, what we want is communion with your Highness.”

“That’s not difficult.”

At my words, the expression of the High Elf changed slightly. Seeing him like that, I threw out the bait.

“But if we want to talk about such important things, shouldn’t my relationship with you become stronger than it is now?”

“Those words are correct.”

And the foolish elf snapped the bait right up.

“Good. Then I know that you have accepted it.”

“What do you mean by that? What did I accept?”

I smiled as I looked at Arnand’s stupefied face.

“There’s nothing like an exchange of swords to create a closer bond between each other.”

The High Elf’s face took on an absurd cast as he heard my suggestion.

“I am a High Elf, so I will not reject a challenge from a single human, even a young human being.”

“If you are worried about losing, don’t be concerned and just hold onto your sword. I will be gentle.”

“A captain of the swordsingers can never be a coward.”

My provocative seeds would never have been eaten were Arnand another High Elf.

This High Elf has just encountered the world for the first time, however. He was like a child who did not know how terrifying reality was. He was like a fresh thunderbolt without the experience required to hide his arrogance and intolerance.

“The sword dance of an elf is far bitterer than it looks.”

The High Elf was eventually provoked enough to accept the battle.

So, he and I stood face to face in the training hall, surrounded by palace knights.

I turned my head, seeing that the palace knights spectating the bout were quite a lot.

The High Elf’s sword hung limply in his grasp as he looked at me. His eyes were calm at first glance, but I recognized the sneaky malice peculiar to the faeries wandering about in them.

“Oh,” I said as I met his gaze, as if just remembering something, “it’s no fun just to compete, so we bet.”

‘It’s starting again.’

‘He doesn’t fight without betting anymore.’

I ignored the comments of the palace knights.

“If you’re afraid of losing, quit now.”

“What kind of bet is it?” Arnand asked, frowning at my crude provocation.

“If one side admits defeat or drops their sword, they lose. The losing side must accept one request from the victor.”

“We elves do not take covenants lightly.”

“Okay? That’s a coincidence – I also take promises made to me seriously.”

As Arnand heard my words, he raised the corners of his mouth into an arrogant sneer, outright ridiculing me. His face showed that he didn’t even consider that he’ll lose.

I again heard the whispers of the palace knights.

‘Count Bale Balahard was just as arrogant.’

‘Teuton’s duke was also blindsided in the same way.’

‘This is totally fun.’

I shook my head slightly as I heard them speak. My former opponents were different than the High Elf in front of me – Arnand was going to lose far more than the others.

‘Tak~ Tak~’

The High Elf started to dance on the balls of his feet and beat out a rhythm.

And I…

‘Qaup~’

Stepped through the beats.

CHAPTER 220
IT WAS EMPTY, BUT IT WAS FULL (6)

Her mother was an unclean woman, and she was the result of her mother's sins.

Her father also knew this, but he couldn't leave her mother. He was a knight that had risen from the common people. While her mother was not great, she still had the blood of the nobles in her. Her mother's history was filthy, so her father was desperate to hide it so that he could avoid the contempt of his comrades and the subtler contempt of his lord.

And so, her father decided to cover up the injustices committed by his wife.

That decision made everyone unhappy.

When her father was drunk, he became angry with her mother, as angry as fire. Instead of bowing down and apologizing, her mother demeaned her father's peasant origins, insulting him.

Every day, mother and father poured venom into each other's ears and acted only out of hate. The girl had felt that it was all her fault at that time, so she just cried without knowing what to do.

No one comforted her.

Her father was in a difficult situation and tried to control his feelings, while her mother was a vain woman who had no interests other than dressing herself up. Her father relieved his anger and hatred through training.

As time went on, her father, who had been exceptional enough to receive a knighthood, which was rare for commoners, quickly became the most important knight of his lord.

Naturally, the time he spent away from the mansion grew even longer.

The number of quarrels between her father and her mother gradually decreased.

The girl cried less but still did not know what to do. That didn't mean her childhood had changed for the better, however.

Her mother regarded the girl as evidence of her infidelity because she looked subtly different from humans. In fear that her adultery would become widely known, her mother confined her to the mansion.

Hard, denigrating curses and beatings became just another element of this existence. The girl was trapped in a small room in the mansion and withered away under her mother's abuse.

Then, when she was thirteen years old, her mother came to her. She looked terrified, and the girl later learned that it was because the noble family that her mother belonged to had bought a great lord's resentment and was being destroyed.

"Let's run away. If we stay here, that man will surely not leave you and me alone."

The mother fetched the girl from the room, escaping the mansion with her. She didn't do it out of motherly love.

"Even if he doesn't recognize me, he will recognize the child who carries his blood. You look just like him."

Her mother said that someone wouldn't recognize her because she had grown old and dull.

Without knowing anything about what was going on, the girl was led away by her mother's hand. For the first time in her life, she left the mansion. But before she could fully realize the vastness of the world outside, pursuers sent by her father caught up to them.

It happened less than half a day after mother and daughter left the mansion.

"Well! He's coming to save us. He'll save me, you'll see…"

Her mother chattered like a lunatic while being dragged along by her father's soldiers.

When they were dragged back to their estate, all that awaited them were flaming ruins and terrible corpses. A group of people greeted them, standing before the

corpses piled up in the center of the courtyard.

“At last! They must be the people he sent to save me!” her mother cried out with an ecstatic face as if she was drunk on the fresh smell that came from the strangers.

It was then that one of these people flipped back her hood and revealed her face. She was so beautiful, and even her long ears could not be considered flaws.

The woman looked at the girl and raised her hand. The other green-cloaked monsters disappeared in front of the girl’s eyes in a flash, and in the next second, her father’s soldiers spouted blood as they fell to the ground.

“I am sure! Did he tell you to save me? Where is he now?” her mother asked in joy. “I want to see him as soon as possible. Guide me to hi-”

And while her mother became so excited, her neck was cut clean through. She died.

‘Tuk~ Degururu~’

The girl watched her mother’s head roll over the ground. She shed no tears.

A man came into the courtyard while looking blankly at her mother’s head. It was her father.

‘Sheek~’

After seeing the burning mansion and the severed head of his wife, her father drew his sword.

A brilliant glow rose all along its edge.

“There is a knight who uses a sword aura in such a rural estate? It’s really amazing,” the beautiful woman said as she saw the light, her eyes widening.

Rather than being surprised, the woman’s exaggerated expression seemed only to mock.

“Get away from her!” her father sternly shouted at the woman.

“How can you not know your child is a cuckoo even after looking at those ears? Are

you saying that this offspring is your own?"

"Shut up! I don't care what you want! Stand back!"

"Oh… Such a broken sword you are. You seem ignorant of how to treat a woman with respect. Ah, is it any wonder that your wife enjoyed another man?"

Her father couldn't stand that insult and rushed at the woman. The woman suddenly grabbed the girl and threw her aside.

"Huh!" Her father gave a mournful breath as he hugged her. It was the first time the girl had felt her father's embrace.

"Ooh!"

Hot liquid splattered onto the girl's face, and she didn't know what it was.

"Aaargh…"

A pained groan broke into the girl's ears in the next instant. She raised her head. There was her father… and the woman who had stabbed a sword through his chest. She twisted the blade and laughed with glee.

"I regret this. If it weren't for my mission, I would have been able to taste your pain a little longer."

"What will you do with my daughter… Is it…?"

"Are you worried about your child, even after we have reached this point?"

"Shut up and… answer me!"

"Do not worry. This child's father is the noblest of our clan. In your human terms, he is like a king," the monster said as she looked down at her victim with a cold-blooded stare.

The girl's father looked at her and smiled at her for the first time.

"Don't… You're safe… That's all I…"

A sense of relief passed over her father's face. It lasted only for a while.

"It is only a hybrid with dirty human blood."

Her father's eyes widened.

"You…"

The woman laughed as she looked at the man's distorted face. She laughed with a face full of satiety, like a fat cat. Her father opened his mouth again, but the woman twisted her sword.

'Schloo~'

Her father's body was torn apart as the sword slashed out of his side. The blood-drenched girl looked at the body with a blank face. For a long while, the woman laughed, finding satisfaction in her murder. Then she suddenly stopped laughing, looked at her bloody sword, and said, "Oh. Unfortunately, you have lost both your mother and father in front of you. Although he was not your father."

She said it as if she was really regretful.

"Aren't you sad? Or are you so sad that you can't even cry?" asked the woman. The girl couldn't answer.

"Well, it's not that important now," the woman said and ordered the monster next to her, "Command my swordguard to erase all traces of our presence."

The green-cloaked ghost disappeared silently.

"Tsu. All of this hardship just because the king likes to be a high roller," the woman grumbled, as if displeased, then looked back at the girl and said, "Now, you're going to come with me. There are a lot of kids like you."

The girl did not dare to object in front of the woman, whose eyes still held a greasy murder in them which hadn't cooled down.

The girl nodded.

And so she, Gunn, was collected by the faeries. It was the first time Gunn had met

Sigrun.

* * *

After that, Sigrun traveled to several places to capture half-elves and send them to the forest.

Gunn was one of them. When she arrived in the woods, there were already many half-elves there. There were adults, and there were children of the same age as Gunn. All of them said they arrived in the forest in a similar manner to her.

As one among their number, Gunn was given an elven sword and taught a few rhythms.

During the terrible period of training, instinctive obedience toward the pure-blooded elves was forced into their minds. The fear of the High Elves became deeply imprinted into their souls.

And thus were all emotions except obedience and fear castrated from their beings, and they became swords-elves. On behalf of the pure-bloods, The pure-bloods secretly put them into positions all across the continent, and they died fighting.

The newly arrived children filled the empty spots left by the dead children.

Then, at some point, all the half-elves who had arrived in the forest before Gunn were dead, and she became the first of the nineteen swords-elves.

After that, she was stuck in the forest for a while before receiving a new mission. The objective was to rescue a little boy from a battlefield on which orcs were raging. And in the middle of that battle where the orcs were running mad, Gunn and the half-elves met a dying boy.

The bloody young prince, who had not let go of Gunn's hand until he fainted.

That bleeding prince became the master of Gunn and the swords-elves.

The truth was that it was not important to Gunn and the others who their owner was. If they had to do it, they did it. If they had to die, they died. The Elder High Elf told them to follow the human's orders, so they followed them.

Even if Gunn's tongue had not been cut out, she would never have dared to protest because they were merely livestock. Gunn and her fellow sword-elves were nothing more than puppets moved by the power of obedience and fear.

From the first, it was so. They did what they were told. At some point, the situation changed.

It was the moment when their young master had sang in front of the king of the orcs and slashed out with his sword. It was then that the bonds of subordination that had been imprinted on their souls were broken. The half-elves had nothing in them but fear and obedience towards High Elves, and when even that disappeared, their souls became completely empty.

And in the next moment, deep grief and remorse crept unfiltered into their hearts.

It was the feelings felt by the prince who burned like an inferno before the greenskin king's body. The empty souls of the swords-elves began to be filled again.

And so, they regained the feelings they had always lacked. Although the emotions were not their own, they, who had been only domestic animals, could finally become human again.

True emotion replaced their bonds of subordination.

That was probably why when the young prince was placed in crisis by the Elder High Elf, the sword-elves charged in without hesitating. They even rejected the prince's order that they withdraw. If they could save the young prince from the wicked Elder High Elf, they were prepared to give it their all – even if their deaths awaited them at the end of that charge.

One by one, Gunn's comrades, friends, and sisters – the swords-elves – died in front of her eyes. To Gunn's surprise, she felt sad. She wasn't even sure if it had been her own feelings or the prince's. Gunn was only glad that she could mourn the death of others.

She knew then that she would also offer her life for the prince by following the other half-elves.

Gunn was happy. It was so good for her that her comrades were choosing an end that they wanted and that someone mourned for them. But she didn't express that

emotion in that moment, then.

“Revenge.”

She told the prince that the half-elves were doing it for themselves, that it was their revenge. Gunn didn’t want the young prince to carry the half-elves’ deaths as a burden. Not the prince who already carried everything on his shoulders, the prince who could never ignore the deaths that took place around him.

When the cunning Elder High Elf had used her broken sword to bombard the prince’s body, Gunn had thrown herself before him without hesitation.

As her body was torn into shreds, she saw the pain on the prince’s face. And her master, more furious than ever before, had slashed his sword at the Elder High Elf. That was when he fainted.

Gunn had endured the pain of her torn flesh and picked the prince up. She ran away, then, ran until she could no longer feel the energy of the Elder High Elf. Gunn ran until a hiding spot appeared.

After Gunn reached a mound of rocks and hid the prince’s body, she too fell unconscious.

* * *

Since then, the prince has treated Gunn with unconditional feelings of trust and love.

The same was true when he had chosen her as the messenger to go to the High Elf.

It was because the prince wished that Gunn, who had been regarded as livestock by the elves, could be confident in front of them by using the borrowed power of her master’s name. All so that she could shake off the fear that remained in her heart.

That was why Gunn had wanted to fulfill her master’s orders in the best way possible.

But she couldn’t.

The moment she encountered the High Elf’s unique presence, her limbs stiffened like a frog in front of a snake. Even though Gunn knew her master’s dignity would be hurt

if she was weak, she behaved out of fear.

Gunn was disgusted with herself for not being able to repay the trust of the prince.

Nevertheless, her master did not blame her. Rather, he said she had worked hard and even patted her shoulder. The more he told Gunn she did good, the greater grew her guilt.

But that wasn't the end of it.

Gunn was told that her master would be fighting against the High Elf. Startled, she headed straight to the dojo, where she saw the prince. Before the duel, he looked at her and gave her a little smile.

"I will take your revenge for you," he said while laughing. Gunn hoped he could.

The prince's power came from poetry, and reciting verses in front of High Elves was never a beneficial tactic. They were monsters who could perform sword dances by weaving other people's songs into their rhythms on the spot. But it was too late – the male High Elf started dancing his rhythm lightly over the floor.

The unique energy that marked the start of his dance spread all over the place.

He couldn't be interrupted anymore.

"Ah," Gunn sighed regretfully when suddenly her master stamped his feet down hard on the floor.

'Quazzak~'

The noise of the cracking floor spread throughout the training hall.

It was at that moment that the High Elf's expression changed – even though the prince's feet had smashed onto the empty floor without touching the elf's body.

"You must have hoped to get a few verses from me by acting provocative," Gunn's master then said. "But, unfortunately, you won't hear a single verse from my mouth."

The prince said this as if he had known everything from the beginning. The High Elf again began building up his rhythm, and the prince stomped on the floor several

times to fragment the beat. The High Elf's expression hardened, but only for a while.

"That's an interesting trick."

The High Elf quickly started chatting with a carefree face. "I hope you don't think that you can destroy a sword dance with your humorous clomping, right?"

The High Elf smirked as he laughed, outright ridiculing the prince. Gunn clenched her fists in regret. She had hoped that her master's improvisation might have been a way to destroy the rhythm.

"The orcs roar out fiercely. The bellowing of giants is great and powerful. The dwarves' iron cannons are as loud as any giant or orc. But that doesn't mean that any of them could destroy the sword-dances of our clan," the High Elf said and gracefully shook his sword.

'Woow~'

The elf's sword began to keen clearly.

"If our skill could be destroyed just because the battlefield was noisy, our race would have become extinct along with the giants."

"I see."

The prince responded casually to the High Elf's arrogant words. It was then that Gunn looked at her master's face.

"Well, I wasn't really expecting it to work either. I just tried it."

Her master was laughing.

"Here is the real thing, anyway."

It was laughter unique to the prince when he was looking arrogantly down upon someone.

Gunn's master raised his sword. On its blade shone the brilliant light which had killed countless enemies. It was the supreme energy channeled from his single heart. The master's sword, filled with light, began to cry.

“See, I woke up after sleeping for a while, and there was an interesting trick floating around the world.”

However, Gunn realized that the sound and energy wave was not like what her maser usually used.

‘Woow~ Woow~’

Two noises seemed to be resonating with each other. It was like-

“It’s a mana chain.”

It was something that could only be used by a knight of the ring.

“I don’t know anything different, but it’s amazing that I can resonate with someone else’s mana.”

CHAPTER 221
DEEP DARKNESS IS A HARBINGER OF THE COMING DAWN (1)

Carls Ulrich knew better than anyone what the nature of the person he served was like.

He was never talkative. There was no way that he would first reveal what he wanted to do, what he was trying to do, and what he was thinking, so Carls had struggled several times in his duties as escort knight.

The Crown Prince was always so silent. He was even more so when he was holding a sword. The prince was a great man who would rather let his sword talk once instead of he himself talking sloppily.

Such a prince had talked a lot today. In addition to this, Carls Ulrich knew when the Crown Prince spoke so much: When he had something to teach, or when he wanted to crush someone openly.

His battle with Count Bale Balahard had fallen into the former category; his recent battle with the Number One Knight in the West had fallen into the latter. It seemed that today's battle was also in the latter class.

Carls Ulrich looked at the prince.

The Crown Prince raised his chin arrogantly and smirked while looking at the being called a High Elf. Cold anger and hostility glistened in the prince's eyes.

His appearance was such that he seemed to have completely defined the High Elves as an enemy. That unique, arrogant face of the prince was how he looked when dealing with enemies.

"See, I woke up after sleeping for a while, and there was an interesting trick floating around the world."

It was then that the prince channeled mana onto his sword. The proof of him being a Master, the Aura Blade, blazed brightly. No matter how many times Carls had seen it, he couldn't help but admiring its brilliant and intense glare.

But at that very moment, 'Thump Thump'

Carls' heart started violently beating. His mana rings began to resonate with random fluctuations.

'Woow, woow!'

It was then that the prince's sword energy changed dramatically.

"It's a mana chain."

The energy was a resonance of mana, which was not achievable by those who gathered mana in the heart, only by those who accumulated mana in rings.

"I don't know anything different, but it's amazing that I can resonate with someone else's mana."

And some of those resonating waves were Carls' own.

Carls widened his eyes and looked around.

He saw that several of his comrades had embarrassed faces. All of them had served the Crown Prince for a long time; all of them had followed him into war.

At one time, they had sung as if their throats would burst, sung strange songs that echoed over the battlefield. During the wars, they had experienced the miracle used by the Crown Prince, the thing called Muhunshi. It was only upon hearing those songs that Carls came to realize his rings reacted to them.

What was happening now was nothing new – Carls had, after all, experienced those countless wars.

The only difference was that Carls himself had been a participant in those battles; now, he was participating regardless of his intentions. The prince ignored the will of the palace knights and hadn't even asked whether it was really good to resonate with others' mana.

In addition, the Crown Prince did not release a single verse from his mouth.

Carls' face took on a semblance of surprise.

He only pretended to be amazed; none of the miracles the Crown Prince created surprised him anymore. At this point, it wouldn't be surprising if the prince suddenly started using magic.

After regaining his composure, Carls looked at Prince Adrian again.

And he realized that today's duel wasn't just to trample the High Elf.

The prince's eyes were talking, saying: Look carefully. Look how the elves fight, how I fight. Also, what to do when dealing with elves.

The moment Carls saw the prince's eyes, he had an intuition that the crown prince was preparing for a war against the elves. In the near future, the day will come to fight them.

Carls blamed himself for not thinking about it.

It wasn't long ago that the Crown Prince was brought in bloodstained from the middle of the kingdom, harmed by an elf. It wasn't that long ago that the prince had warned of how insidious the elves were, what danger they posed. Even if the elves had a justification for coming to help the kingdom, Carls didn't understand why he had forgotten that warning so quickly.

It seems that he was possessed by their angelic appearance. It seemed that he had been fooled by their good temperament. Otherwise, there would have been no way he could have forgotten to be aware and stay on the defensive.

It felt as if a knife had been driven into Carls' heart. And as he felt that, the spirit of the palace knights surrounding him changed, all at once. It must be because everyone had figured out the will of the Crown Prince.

'Woow, Woow!'

As the energy of the palace knights sharpened, the prince's Sword Aura grew brighter.

“I feel so good.” The prince laughed in satisfaction. Then he fixed his sword in both hands and readied it.

“Come.”

The High Elf lowered his posture with a stern face.

And at that moment, ‘Wdshwa’ the elf disappeared.

No, he seemed to disappear.

‘Visak!’

Carls turned his head, following the sharp metal tone that rang out.

The elf had stood to one side of the hall; he had now reached the front of the prince and was striking out with his sword. The elf’s sword turned hazy.

‘Chang! Chang!’

Metallic sounds erupted again. The strikes were so quick that Carls could barely know where the sword had stabbed until the sounds rang out.

‘Tak Tak’

There came a noise as the elf leaped over the dojo’s floor, and his appearance became blurred again. The prince swiveled around and slid his sword backward.

‘Klang!’

Where the prince had turned to, the elf appeared, and its blow was blocked. The elf drew a circle in the air with his sword and stabbed out again.

Once more came the sound of metal on metal. The elf disappeared suddenly.

‘Swish Swish’

White shadows appeared and disappeared around the prince at a speed that was difficult to follow with the eyes. In contrast, the prince stood tall on the spot and did not move one foot.

If the High Elf was a gale, the prince was a rock.

A flurry struck as if it would topple the rock, but the rock stood firm, forcing away the wind that battered against it. The prince's sword cried sharply, metallically. Flashes of light were seen as the sharp, puncturing sounds burst out ceaselessly.

"That's right. What about that handsome sword dance of yours?" screamed the Crown Prince amid the sounds of sword strikes.

"Your Highness has no intention of playing fair, so neither do I!" came the shout of the elf from behind the prince.

'Saaah!'

A silvery-white light flashed out with a sound as that of a snake flicking its tongue. The Crown Prince had been standing upright and in place until then, he suddenly crouched and swiveled his body in a half-turn. A dark blue sword-light swept around the area, breaking through the floor of the dojo at once. Stone fragments scattered, and dust rose into the air. From the cloud of dirt erupted dozens of metal-on-metal sounds.

Then, at some point, the sounds stopped. Carls gave strength to the eyes.

The prince stood tall in the middle of dirt and dust, his sword hanging in his grip as he looked at his shoulder.

'Hwaak!' The prince's shoulder bloomed red. He looked at his wound with indifferent eyes, shook his arm once, and looked back – as if he didn't care about the shoulder wound.

Except for the prince's red-tinged shoulders, he looked no different from when he first entered the duel. It wasn't the same on the elf's side.

All of his finely-braided hair had become tangled and messy, and his uniform, which had been as neat as a priest's, was torn, stripped into rags. The fine appearance he had shown before had become poorly formed indeed.

'Shh!' the High Elf raised his hand and stroked his neck. Then he frowned. His white gloves quickly sucked in blood and turned red. Suddenly, the collar of his uniform was also dyed red.

“It must be your first wound,” the prince said as he looked at the elf.

“The High Elves taught me that it’s shameful to keep an injured person alive.”

The elf’s face froze when he heard such a blatant provocation. Then it became completely expressionless. At the same time, the elf’s temperament completely changed. The mysterious, benevolent faerie no longer existed. There was only a ghost-like elf with dull eyes that could sporadically be seen through his tangled hair.

A wind blew around the elf, and it was as gloomy as a wind blowing through a shadowy valley.

‘Uuuh, Uuuuh!’

The sound of a bereaved, deceased woman’s wails spread through the dojo.

Goosebumps sprouted all over Carls’ body. He unconsciously sought out the prince. Fortunately, the Crown Prince wasn’t surprised by the energy that came with that wind.

“The elf’s title is the ‘Whispering Wind,’ and that’s perfect. This is just like a wind blowing through a graveyard.”

Rather, he was happy and added, “Let’s hear what the ghostly woman’s wail can do.”

“Keep in mind that everything that happens from now on is on your Highness’s own initiative,” the High Elf said then with a face which was as insidious as the sudden change in his temperament.

Instead of answering, the prince ran his fingers along the edge of his sword.

The elf stared at the prince and readied his weapon.

“Ahhh,” the elf started humming softly. Then he stepped forward, lightly touching the floor with his toes.

‘Uch-shuck uch-shuck’ over the low, gloomy humming came the sound of his feet shifting.

‘Skshh,’ his sword scratched over the floor, a strange noise that distracted the

listener's mind.

Carls clutched his beating heart and almost stumbled.

"Woow," the elf's groan flowed from place to place, a groan full of pain, as if it was crushing nightmares into a single sound. Little by little, the elf's humming grew faster.

The sounds of his feet moving along the floor picked up in rhythm, and the sound of his sword scratching the floor suddenly changed. The palace knights started retching, and Carls also gasped and groaned.

Right then- 'Woow!'

The clear keening of a sword penetrated into Carls' ears. At the same time, his ring started resonating under its own will as it released mana.

"Ah!" Carls' spirit, which had been confused, awakened. But that was only for a while, as the elf's tune began invading his mind again. Carls raised his hands. He was about to cover his ears and raise his mana to resist the elf's terrible song.

"Do not cover your ears!"

If it weren't for the Crown Prince's yelling, Carls would have done so. The prince told him to endure, even if it was painful. He said it was a rare opportunity to hear a High Elf singing.

"Remember to keep your senses!"

And Carls couldn't think about forgetting. Before he could even question what it was that he had to remember, his rings began to cry loudly.

'Woow!

At the same time, the prince's Aura Blade soared.

* * *

I clucked my tongue.

In front of me, I saw palace knights groaning, overwhelmed by the energy of a High Elf.

They woke up one by one, starting with Carls, and were resisting, but I saw that it took great strength for them to strive against the energy. The elf's full sword-dance hasn't even started yet; he only hummed his tune. If it went on like this, the moment his sword dance began, he would become engrossed in it, consumed by its rhythm.

I had to stop that now – and I had the ability to do so. At best, the elf's power was equal to the Overlord's fervor.

If I wanted to, I would be able to overwhelm him by reciting a [Mythic] poem such as [Poetry of the Dragon Slayer] or [Poetry of Sudden Change].

It would be easy to interrupt his song, but I didn't want to do it that way, as I would only be gaining a personal victory. What I was hoping for was much bigger than that.

'The faeries go into the forests, the dwarves go under the earth.'

This was the pledge that was made after the Great War, one that has become obsolete. Sigrun and the High Elf before me were proof of this. They have left the forest without invitation and entered the kingdom.

It was natural: This was the era in which mythical martial arts lie forgotten, having become meaningless songs. The promise made at the end of the Great War has become ancient history, and none adhered to it. The prohibitions set upon the evil faeries have disappeared and no longer held any true value. The breach of this oath was inevitable, and war could be the only outcome.

This was the era when humans had to fight the faeries again, like in the age of the Great War.

But things were different now than how they had been then.

Knights who have transcended no longer existed and even the descendant of the great Sky Blade has only come close to a transcendence that he has never been able to achieve.

When monsters like Sigrun came into this world to sow carnage, there was no one to stop them. If war broke out, humans would have become the inevitable victims. But

no law in this world says one must just give up and die.

Dance poetry was forgotten, but now humans have a new power: The mana chain.

It is a power of resonance, similar to the rhythms of the elves, yet different. I had combined the mana released from my heart into one small ring. It was just an imitation, so it was unstable, and the wave was weak, but it was enough to facilitate resonance with my heart.

What I lacked, I chose to borrow from others. This would have been impossible had I not awakened in times of war. I looked at the High Elf. He was letting the secret that his race has cultivated for countless years gradually take shape. Compared to that, the fake ring I had created and the songs created by my resonance with the palace knights was just a crude song, with more weaknesses than strengths.

But- “I’m not wrong.”

I was convinced: I wasn’t alone with this power.

This was the enlightenment given to me by my uncle, who had resonated by turning his rings freely during my songs. This was the method that so many rangers and knights of Winter Castle had taught me. While I slept the sleep of a sword, a number of humans had refined and finally established a new technique. The mana chain was a new sword that humanity has acquired since the use of Muhunshi.

‘Shuck!’

At that moment, the faerie race’s swordsinger began his sword-dance.

CHAPTER 222
DEEP DARKNESS IS A HARBINGER OF THE COMING DAWN (2)

‘Uuh, uuh, uuh!’ The heart-shaking sound felt as if it would burst my ears.

‘Hwaak!’ A gloomy mist arose and wrapped around Arnand, and then it came to me, surrounded me.

“Ahhh!” Through it, I heard the elf humming sorrowfully.

My heart shook, and the enormous tide of mana that was inactive within me started to wildly swirl as if it would be released immediately.

Not yet… Not yet…

I forced the fluctuating mana down. I readied my sword, and my heart began resonating with the little ring.

‘Ji-ing!’

Small vibrations crawled from my heart to my shoulder, all the way along my arm, and then onto my sword.

‘Wooow!’ my sword trembled and cried. Its sound was too soft and weak compared to the wave of noise from the elf, which sounded as if thousands of the dead were sobbing.

I shifted my stance, stamped down.

‘Thud!’ the roaring sound of the floor cracking sounded alongside the keening of my sword. The Aura Blade, the sound of moving feet, and my heart and ring all became one.

‘Woow, Woow!’

An intense energy wave broke out, and the mist that had consumed the whole area was torn apart.

Through its fragments, the High Elf appeared. His eyes were dull; his expression was that of a frozen corpse. A rhythm like the sobbing of the deceased flowed through his constantly-glowing lips. My shoulders, one of which being wounded, stiffened for an instant.

'Sassasak,' and a long line deftly sliced through the air. A dark grayish-white sword came flying at my throat. I twisted my neck to the side and blocked Arnand's sword as I raised my own. I twisted my grip as the elf's misty sword bounced from my blade. I rotated my sword, pulling it back, and struck out like the head of a viper. It was blocked at once, and I stepped back, spreading my legs as I sliced down with my sword from above. In that one movement, I parried another strike aimed at my neck as I brought my sword in front of my chest.

'Bang!'

Sparks scattered in the air, but my eyes were focused beyond the flying fragments of sword-light. Again, the elf struck at me. I blocked, dodged, and counterattacked.

'Klang klang!' my sword roared as it struck into his, and the surviving power of his whispering wind scattered over the dojo's floor. Aura Blade fragments disturbed my eyes.

"Ahhh!"

In the meantime, the High Elf didn't stop humming. I also continued to resonate with mana without losing a beat. The elf had launched countless attacks without gaining the upper hand, and at that point, he started performing his sword-dance in earnest.

His feet made countless sounds as they danced, and the misty trajectories that had broken the impact of sword strikes drew countless curves in the air – curving and curving.

The moment that those numerous spirals connected into a whole, the elf's bloody dance would reach an incomparable level. If it hadn't been for my interruption, it would have happened immediately.

'Woow!'

I constantly made attempts to disturb Arnand while his dance continued. Between sword strike and sword strike, I would shift my stance to block the path of his footfalls. I battled against his humming by letting my sword keen, and my mana heart and ring constantly resonated, interfering with the rhythm of his dance.

As a result, the High Elf's sword-dance became neither this nor that, but an ambiguous movement. His eyes became duller, and then they started to burn with a blue light.

At that moment, his humming began to change, and the sound of sobbing changed radically into one of weeping. His footfalls also became louder, as if he was stomping onto the floor.

'Ahhhhhh!'

His sword's sudden cry swallowed the keening of my own, the gloomy energy arising from his body began to overwhelm the resonance of my heart and mana. The hazy fog swallowed up my energy wave.

'Woow!'

My sword rang, and I pushed my heart and ring even harder. That meant nothing in the face of the elf's changed spirit and rhythm, however.

'Bkrah Bkrah!'

The mana ring I had was starting to crack. It seemed that this was as far as a ring created through imitation could go when dealing with a High Elf's sword-dance.

I thought so – but I was wrong.

'Thud!'

A heavy noise suddenly rang out.

'Thud!'

It was the sound of heavy steel being banged on a floor.

'Thud!'

That selfsame sound repeated. At that moment, my Sword Aura, which had been suppressed and faded by Arnand's rhythm, began to rise in intensity. My heart and ring also resonated more vigorously.

I gave my sword a strong shake, and a heavy wave erupted from its edge. The High Elf stepped back. In the meantime, I turned my head to find the source of the sudden noise.

'Thud!'

The palace knights were standing firmly in place, stamping their shields on the floor. Those without shields were pounding their chests with iron gauntlets.

'Thud!'

The knights stamped.

'Thud!'

They stamped their shields, telling me it wasn't over yet.

'Thud!'

They beat their breastplates, telling me to move forward.

"Hahaha," I laughed

'Thud!'

And the knights' rings resonated with the sound of their stamping shields.

'Thud!'

I stepped closer as they pounded fists upon chests. My heart and ring began resonating with great intensity. The waves created by the knights became overlaid with my own mana. I took another step, and the floor loudly burst apart under my tread. This was the path which humanity has constantly walked for four hundred years while I had slept. I took another step – I was just following the footsteps upon that road.

And when my steps finally brought me in front of the High Elf- “Don’t ignore humans again, faerie.” I sliced out at the elf who’s blade was trembling.

‘Woow,’ a blue flame roared over my blade, and when it met his gray-white sword, that sword was engulfed in the heat, and the last traces of mist melted away.

The face of the elf twisted like a demon’s, and blue flames poured into it.

* * *

Silence descended over the training hall. It had been full of noise a while ago; now it was so quiet that the drop of a needle would be heard. In that silence, I withdrew my sword. The High Elf looked at me.

‘Ploop~’

His braided hair had been cut through, and it fell to the floor one instant later.

Arnand widened his eyes. Then he stroked his face. A flash of light lit up in the guy’s eyes as he touched the traces of where the blue flames had played over his face and left their bloody scorch marks.

“This is not fair,” he said to me after a while in a tight voice. His sharp gaze swept over everyone in the hall as he sneered. The palace knights met his gaze as if nothing had happened.

It didn’t work. Crafty guys like them looked guilty even when they slept. I started laughing, bereft of my senses, when the elf said to me, “I can’t accept this defeat.”

Resentment had entered his eyes again, and when I saw that murder and anger within him, I asked, “So what do you want?”

“A fair fight without anyone’s intervention,” Arnand replied.

“Good,” I answered him without hesitation. It was strange that he had made his request so eagerly, what with his face still filled with scorch marks.

“However, to stimulate my excitement, which has cooled down, we must have a motive.”

When Arnand spoke, it seemed that he already knew what I meant.

“If it’s a motivation-”

“Let’s raise the stakes of the bet.”

“How?”

Again, I answered him without hesitation.

“We will increase the demands the winner makes to the loser to three. Of course, these demands cannot be rejected.”

Arnand accepted my bet with ease. It was sad to see that he could still not abandon his arrogance even after things had reached this point.

“I say again: Elven covenants are not taken lightly.”

Arnand even treated me like a fool, clearly not knowing how he looked in his rags and his bad haircut.

“Let’s see if you say that later,” came my response as I tapped the tip of my sword against the floor. Seeing my gesture, Arnand shut his lips tight and stepped back.

‘Shuck’

When there was a moderate distance between us, he raised his sword.

“This time, they’re not part of it.”

Seeing that the guy persisted in his concern about the involvement of others, I gave the palace knights an order.

“Step away, guys.”

The palace knights increased their distance from me at once.

“That’s not enough.”

Even then, the elf was not satisfied and demanded a few conditions from me. I

accepted all his terms.

“Do not move. Do not use even a sliver of mana. Just watch from where you stand.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The palace knights spread their legs and folded their arms over their chests: The perfect stance for a spectator. I looked at the High Elf and asked, “Are you satisfied now?”

He nodded to my question with an arrogant face that showed he had completely forgotten about his defeat. He was unaware of how thoroughly the most powerful weapon of his race had just been destroyed. Arnand didn’t even know what exactly he was wagering in our bet.

He just looked at me with a frantic look, seeking a way to somehow pay me back for his shame. His was truly an arrogant face, the visage of an unripe seed. I grinned.

By then, I had released my true existence, no longer hiding it. My energy soared endlessly and began to growl at the elf. Arnand’s fully-confident face hardened.

“If you were planning to change your attitude after the duel, you better step back now.”

I released a portion of my soul and enforced coercion to my covenant with Arnand.

“I have sworn upon my soul on the covenant between us, so you should do the same.”

“I… I will.”

After hesitating for a moment, Arnand swore on my soul to faithfully fulfill the covenant.

“If you break this sacred oath, you will pay the price.”

After finishing the sealing of our agreement, I beckoned to the elf.

“Then start.”

After my words, he began raising his energy and moving his lips. From the beginning,

as if he wanted the battle done with right away, his humming reached its peak without any warning.

Looking at him, I quietly channeled mana into the edge of my sword. When the light upon my blade reached peak intensity, I charged at the elf where he stood, and I slashed out in a downward arc.

'Lool,' my sword cried. My Aura Blade dizzied my eyes as it met the elf's heart-shaking hum.

Everything Arnand created was torn apart in front of him, and my blade kept on advancing.

Fear blossomed in the High Elf's eyes, instinctive fear of his impending death.

But I halted the death that had come upon him.

'Chsook!'

The tip of my sword stabbed slightly into his chest, and blood soon poured from the wound. Arnand's eyes looked at his chest and turned back to me again. The disbelief and amazement that filled them made me cheerful.

"Uh- How…"

As I looked into his eyes, I could see inside of him.

Arnand had pretended to be caught up in my provocation; he wanted me to believe it.

In this era where myths were forgotten, the elf believed that it would not be easy for me to obtain the power of lost ages, even if I was intent upon it. The High Elf figured that even if he faced the Dragon Slayer's successor, this successor could never hope to reach the karma of his ancestor.

He had been sorely mistaken.

The power of the Leonberger family wasn't just the karma of a slayer of a true dragon.

“I was not called a dragon slayer without having killed a dragon. It is because I was able to slay the dragon that I became the Dragon Slayer.”

If I had cut the scales from the mad dragon, then what chance did this juvenile High Elf’s murky sword ever have?

CHAPTER 223
DEEP DARKNESS IS A HARBINGER OF THE COMING DAWN (3)

The arrogant High Elf couldn't convince himself of his defeat until the end. I understood how he was feeling. No matter how sharp the first King Leonberger's Dragon Slayer sword was, the elf had believed that a child less than half his age would never be able to surpass him.

In fact, my soul was that of a sword that had lived several times more compared to the foolish High Elf.

I didn't even tell him that. I just scoffed and started laughing at the arrogance put forth by one who was only a fraction of my age. I laughed for a long while, then told Arnand, "Right. Now that our game is over, the time has come to keep your promise."

The High Elf's eyes shook as if they were was an earthquake raging within him.

"This is the first requirement," I said as I looked at the elf. "Apologize."

His eyes widened as he heard my unexpected words.

"What am I apologizing for," he then asked.

Instead of answering, I looked back: There stood a half-elf, looking at me.

"You," I called her over and let her stand beside me – and I exercised the first boon given to me as the victor by the High Elf.

"You should apologize to her, not to me."

When Gunn realized the situation, she started to gesture in confusion.

(Opportunities to get something from High Elves are rare. Look to the future. Make demands that will be useful in the long term)

“Whatever I ask for, nothing will last longer than seeing the rare sight of a High Elf apologizing to a half-elf.”

The High Elf stared at me with a stiffened face.

“Are you telling me, a High Elf, to bow my head to a half-blood?”

“You got that right.”

“It cannot be accepted.”

“Don’t be mistaken. This is not a request.”

Looking at the elf, I reminded him of our covenant.

“If you don’t accept it, what you will lose is not your great pride, but the part of your soul you used to bind our covenant with. If you’re willing to accept that, I won’t force you anymore.”

Arnand’s face was terribly distorted. He turned his head and glared at Gunn. Then, he shook his head. His appearance after having been defeated by me twice made him look far weaker, yet he still considered my request to be unreasonable. He didn’t know that the longer he waited, the angrier I became. It was hard for Arnand, and after a long time, he bared his teeth and spoke.

“I hope this half-blood is important to your Highness.”

He said that, no matter how worthy a woman Gunn might be, he would always resent her for bringing such a permanent shame upon him, a High Elf. Despite his blatant threat, I didn’t raise a single eyebrow. I just looked at him and said, “Go to your knees and apologize.”

‘Shh,’ the high elf began crouching, with a disgusted face, as if he was kneeling into a field of filth.

‘Chin,’ his knees bent so slowly and finally touched the floor.

“Satisfied? That’s it.” The elf no longer spoke as if he had an oiled tongue; he now spat out crude words. I watched him, then released my spirit and pressed it down upon the elf.

Arnand had knelt so half-heartedly, he now collapsed to the floor, unable to overcome my energy. I forced him to stay kneeling on his knees, forced him to apologize.

Gunn was staring at him blankly. The emotions on her face were so complex that I could not even dare to guess at her internal mindscape. I just hoped that this would lessen the fear of High Elves that had been rooted in her heart and that it would serve her as her reward for her past torments as a slave.

Gunn stood looking at the elf with a complicated face for a long time. I waited patiently so that she could fully enjoy the humiliation of the arrogant High Elf. In the meantime, Arnand tried to raise himself several times, but I pressed him down every time, forcing him down, making sure his posture remained lowered. In the end, he gave up resisting and just waited.

After some time, Gunn looked at me and nodded. I did not know how she felt, what she thought, after seeing the High Elf. Only the fact that her stiff body had relaxed and that she was looking at me as she usually looked at me was important.

I drew back the energy and spirit I had released. Arnand shook himself awake, fearful, as he felt the relief in pressure.

“Then, I will tell you the next requirement.”

Looking at the elf’s face, which was as dry as a grain of sand in the desert, I made my second demand.

“Nectar.”

Arnand had already suffered enough shame; now, the face of the elf, which had seemed as if it didn’t matter what I would ask for next, hardened like stone.

“You know what that is?”

“Everybody knows. You guys call it the Protection of the Forest.”

Arnand growled as he heard my words.

“If you know what it is, you know how precious it is.”

“I was told by a handsome High Elf that each elf only receives it once in their lives.”

“Do you think I’ll give you something like that?”

In the worst case, if he had wanted to break the agreement, there still remained a reason for him to give me the Nectar.

“If you would pay the price for breaking the covenant, I would happily withdraw my request. Keep that in mind.”

Looking at him, I laughed as I saw him bare his teeth at me.

“If you don’t give me the nectar, then you will fail the successive, final requirement as well.”

I was threatening him gravely, and I knew he would not fail to understand the hidden threat that existed within my words. It would’ve sounded strange to someone who did not know how the existence of souls functioned and how they could be damaged.

A successive failure of a binding covenant… the price paid for that would never be a light one to bear for a young High Elf. Maybe he would be damaged so much that he could never again dance his sword-dance. In all likelihood, it would be so.

Arnand’s face was terribly distorted.

Accepting my offer would mean that he would be offering up something that would have aided him greatly, and rejecting it would hurt his very soul. The High Elf couldn’t do this; he couldn’t do that; he could only chew his lips in anguish. I decided to show him a bit of goodwill.

“If you offer it to me, I promise that the third demand will be relatively straightforward.”

It was so small a hope I could give Arnand that I didn’t know whether it bred any good faith in him. After my offer, he pondered on it for a while. I was relaxed as I admired the changing color of the High Elf’s face.

“Fwoo,” the elf sighed and then glided his hand into a pocket, and from it, offered me a small silver bottle. It was a small flask, about the size of a little finger.

My eyes stretched wide because the material of the flask was one rarely seen in this world. It was a rare metal hard enough to be compared to dragon bone. It was capable of being forged into the most excellent of swords, yet only a handful of such weapons had ever been made. All blacksmiths in the world wished to obtain this metal; it was called True Silver of Silver.

I snatched the Nectar from the High Elf's hand and touched the silver flask again and again.

It was obviously made of True Silver. Laughter flowed from me; when I had asked for the elixir of knightly rebirth, a True Silver flask came as an unexpected bonus. What else can it be called but a windfall?

After touching the True Silver flask for a while, I laughed and stowed it deep within my chest pocket. It would have been a big deal if the High Elf had drummed up the courage to ask for the return of his flask. All I had asked for was the Nectar, so there would have been no valid reason for me to reject his request.

Fortunately, however, the High Elf who had been robbed of his Nectar seemed intent only on that.

He merely stood tall with a lost expression upon his face.

"What is the third requirement?" he then asked after a while.

"I'll tell you after thinking a little bit more."

Instead of answering him right away, I promised I would do so later. The High Elf gave a sigh of relief. The tragedies he had been forced to endure were over, so he thought he was fortunate to be let off the hook for now. But when he truly woke up, he would realize it – it would've been better for me to tell him straight away.

It wasn't because I was compassionate about his situation that I didn't voice the third demand there and then. I merely did it to make him tremble, with anxiety and dread, not knowing what I would be asking for with my third demand.

I will only allow him to fulfill the full covenant after he suffered enough.

"If I'm done thinking about it, I'll send someone. So, don't go back today."

After hearing my words, the High Elf escaped from the hall, almost running.

He had lost his pride and his Nectar. He had even lost True Silver.

It was such a shabby exit.

* * *

Having obtained the Nectar, I went straight to the king's bed.

"I heard that things at your palace were noisy. I almost went to look."

I ignored the king's words and stepped forward. Ignoring his gaze, with him looking at me with doubt-filled eyes, I reached out like a lightning bolt.

"What is this?" I demanded.

The king had tried to draw back from me, but it was too late: I had snatched away his coat. All his bandages were unwrapped, and his wound was visible.

Finally seeing the king's wounds, I spat in disgust. His skin had turned rotten, pulped into an ugly mess. The holes that had pierced into him had been sewn shut with crude skill. Something rotten and black bubbled from the still-open gap of the severest hole. The wound was so terrible that it could not be described.

"You came to the capital in this state?"

After he remained silent for a long time, I asked the king a different question.

"You were trying to last four more months like this?"

The king still did not answer; he just sighed. I also didn't wait for an answer.

"In three days, I will heal your Majesty's wounds. Until then, let your body rest enough so that it can withstand the treatment."

As the king heard my words, he finally spoke.

"Huh. It looks like you got that elixir."

“I was lucky.”

“If it were a lucky thing to get, you would’ve had it long ago. It must have taken a lot of effort.”

In fact, I had robbed a foolish High Elf a while ago, but I didn’t dare tell that story to the king in his current state.

“You should not do all this hard work for me,” the king said vaguely as he looked at me. “Even if I drink this heavenly elixir, will I live another hundred years? Will I have fifty more years? It’s all useless.”

“It’s not useless. What about ten years? What about one?”

Seeing the king open his mouth again, I spoke forcefully on.

“Even if you live only another day, you will live as the King of Leonberg, not as a bed-ridden, sickly patient.”

The king shut his mouth at my words. I looked at him and left his bedside. I ordered that he be given sedatives in his meals by the maid and that no one was to disturb him, to make it possible for the king to replenish his strength as much as possible over the next three days.

And three days passed. I entered the king’s bedchamber again. He was in a deep sleep after eating the medicine prepared by the court wizard. His coat was removed, as well as his bandages. The king’s condition had worsened in three days. I took the rope I had slung over my shoulder and started fastening the king’s limbs to the edges of the bed.

Then I took out the flask of Nectar and popped its lid.

‘Hwaak!’ an overpowering scent spread all over the place. So sweet was the scent that I could not stop myself from gulping. I was relieved, then. I bet that the High Elf would never have given up his Nectar if he had smelled this enchanting scent only once. I was sure he would rather have sold his soul, so fatal was the scent to one’s will. Even I was shaken.

Of course, the True Silver was still more attractive to me than the Nectar. When I forced myself to snap awake, the smell of death that had filled the room had

disappeared as if it was never there. I took deep breaths for a while and then gained courage enough to apply the Nectar.

Half of the elixir had flowed over the wound when the king waked up. His eyes were blurred by the anesthetic drug prescribed the wizard; they pointed at me for a moment – and quickly turned white.

“No!” a scream erupted from the king’s mouth. It was a terrible scream, not of this world. I shoved a bundled-up cloth I had prepared in advance into the king’s mouth.

“It’ll be over soon! Please be patient!”

I pressed against the king’s struggling body with one hand and touched his chest with the other.

Mana from my heart ran to my shoulders and into my fingertips, then it flowed inside the king’s body.

I felt the tremendous energy of the Nectar, which was whipping the king’s body in a crazed frenzy. I forcibly grabbed the Nectar’s energy that ran in all directions… and I led it, just as I had led a country boy walking upon a road four hundred years ago.

CHAPTER 224
DEEP DARKNESS IS A HARBINGER OF THE COMING DAWN (4)

Lionel Leonberger had a lengthy dream. Rather, it was more like one of reminiscing, or a lifelong reflection, than a dream. He relived his days of shame when the lords of the kingdom had groaned under the Empire. It was a life that he had endured with all his heart, but which eventually did not unfold as intended.

These were memories of failure and humiliation that he did not want to recall.

Still, when he awoke from his dream, the first thing he felt was a feeling of extreme loss.

Lionel looked at the empty space beside him on his bed with gloomy eyes, stroking his hand over it, and only longing was added to the cold texture of the linen fabric. But Lionel soon struggled to take control of his mind. Long dreams filled with regrets came to those nearing the end of their lives, and when Lionel remembered that the day would soon come when he would meet her again, he felt better.

His day had started in a bad, somber mood, but apart from that, his mind was weirdly clear.

The medicine prescribed by the wizard had been quite effective in relieving the pain from his wound, though not completely. In addition, it also had the side effect of making his mind unclear, as if transporting him into a waking dream.

And even before that, Lionel's mind had not felt ordered. But this morning, the headaches and worries which had always plagued him since ascending to the throne had disappeared as if they had been illusions. Lionel's whole body was full of vitality. It felt as if he was completely reborn.

He thought it was maybe the last sparking of a sputtering candle that people always talked about – until he saw the white skin exposed under his messy clothes.

“Ah…”

Lionel stiffened, then looked at his jacket. He didn’t see anything. Even when he changed clothes three times a day, they still became filthy. Now, there were no dirty bandages that swiftly started getting damp as pus oozed through them; there was no rotten flesh, not even any scars.

He was healed of a wound that both Dotrin’s warlocks and the court wizard had given up treatment of. It was a miracle. Lionel quickly knew who was responsible for this miracle.

“That kid… it was really what he said it was.”

His son wasn’t lying when he said there was an elixir that could save even those who had reached the threshold of death, with only a single breath left to them. It seemed that Ian had come to his room. Lionel frowned. It was hard for him to tell where the hell his dreams ended and whether this was reality. He wracked his mind to get a grip on events.

‘It’ll be over soon! Please be patient!’

The moment Lionel recalled the powerful voice he had heard in the midst of his beastly howls, when he had been in terrible pain, more memories that had slumbered in the depth of his mind started rising to the surface. There had been a terrible sense of loss and pain he had felt the moment something had broken in his body. Then there had come that unfamiliar energy which had filled the emptied spot, and all without Lionel getting a proper sense of it. He had felt a feeling of weakness and of fullness. There had been a feeling that his mind was severed from his other senses.

Lionel’s consciousness suddenly reached the boundary between dreams and reality.

‘After your Majesty wakes up, you may be angry with me, asking why I waste such a precious medicine. Maybe… you would rather thank me, being the monarch you are at present and not how you had been in the past.’

His son’s voice, which he had heard after the pain had subsided, now became a clear reality to Lionel.

‘But gratitude will not have any worth.’

The familiar yet somehow unfamiliar voice was vague.

'As an oath to the Leonberger royal family, I did what I had to do. So, your Majesty must keep your own royal oath in your heart and live for it for the rest of your life.'

And what Lionel had heard just before he had lost consciousness certainly seemed surreal.

"The royal oath…"

In his confusion, he recalled his son's voice in his dreams mentioning a promise to the Leonberger royal family. This land was a kingdom built by those who fled from imperial exploitation and tyranny. The first monarch suffered from fierce monsters and severe cold but was triumphant in the end. And the words of the oath made by the founder of the Leonberger royal family floated in Lionel's mind.

"I will live as the king of the weak."

As soon as Lionel whispered this, his heart started pounding and jumping. One instant later, the rhythm of his heart rose even more, and heat flushed over his face. It felt as if there was a fire in the middle of his breast. Lionel felt a sense of uplifted spirit, and he did not know why he felt this strange sensation. Facing emotions that he was feeling for the first time in his life, the king could only breathe wildly.

The heat did not easily subside in his body, and he wondered if his flesh would always burn like this. The flames faded as abruptly as they had risen, however. When Lionel woke up again, only a slight heat remained, wandering across his flesh. At one point, the heart that stirred across his body gathered in a single place.

It was somewhere near his heart, where the sudden fever had first arisen. The gathered heat suddenly disappeared, as if it had never existed from the beginning. What remained in its place was a heavy mass, beating like a heart.

"Mana?"

It was indeed mana, and in a completely different form from that Lionel had previously had within him.

It was heart mana. As Lionel realized the nature of the heavy mass of mana that had just now settled in his body, his face took on a foolish cast. He had not been talented,

but in his life, he had managed to weave two mana rings, at least becoming a knight with a definite chain.

But now, after he had woken up, his intact rings had disappeared, and a new mana heart had settled in their place. If it weren't embarrassing, that would have been strange.

However, what was really embarrassing was not the altered nature of his mana. No…

Lionel began to call a maid to come and change his sweat-soaked jacket but then stiffened all of a sudden. In a spot not far from his bed stood a mirror that Margarita had used during her life, and a man with an unfamiliar yet strangely familiar face was staring from it.

The only differences between Lionel and the man were their hair colors and age. If Lionel had to pick out the key difference, it was the fact that the man in the mirror had a slightly softer look. Lionel raised his hand and touched his face. The silver-haired man in the mirror touched his face the same way.

Lionel gasped in surprise, and the mirror-man also became stupefied. Only then did Lionel realize it: It was his own reflection.

He couldn't figure out why his white-bleached hair had become a mystical silver and where all the wrinkles that had filled his face had gone.

'Duk! Duk! Duk!'

While Lionel was looking in the mirror blankly, someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," Lionel said quietly after hesitating for a moment.

The door soon opened, and the heads of the kingdom appeared led by the commander of the palace knights. They were all visibly startled, stretching their eyes wide as they took in the king's altered appearance.

Lionel frowned with embarrassment, not knowing how he could explain the situation.

However, it was an unnecessary worry.

Count Stuttgart, Marshal Bielefeld, Prime Minister Kirgayen; not one asked him about the change.

“We are overjoyed at your Majesty’s recovery!”

They simply congratulated him with thrilled faces, as if they knew everything.

Now, the situation was rather that Lionel had to ask them what the circumstances were.

“How the hell did this happen? I know that kid healed me, but I can’t figure out what this big mass of mana is next to my heart and how my appearance has become that of a stranger.”

The commander of the palace knights stepped forward and answered his question.

“His Highness said that he judged that your Majesty’s two rings would disturb the healing energy, trapping it in their chain. To make the energy completely yours, he broke the rings and formed a new mana heart.”

Lionel could scarcely believe it.

Breaking rings is what he’s seen knights do to their enemies, and he’s never heard it to be possible to create mana heart in the body of another person.

But even if he couldn’t believe it, the heavy lump he felt in his chest was proof enough.

“I am glad that you have become more powerful, sire,” old Bielefeld suddenly stammered out a congratulation out of the blue. When Lionel asked why he said this, the old marshal answered him with a smile.

“Your Majesty has absorbed the same amount of mana as a Master. It will be very useless right now, but it is a strength that your Majesty will always have and can develop with constant effort.”

Lionel could not help but be surprised all over again. Although he had thought the lump in his chest was heavy, he hadn’t realized just how much mana it contained. But his surprise soon turned into a frown.

“You talk as if I am a champion.”

“If your Majesty achieves great success in gaining enlightenment appropriate to your spirit, to become a champion is not impossible.”

“With my qualities, I don’t think that it’ll be easy to not only battle with but also harden this heart.”

Lionel knew that even if he possessed the same amount of mana as a Master, he couldn’t break down the wall because of his poor qualities.

“Where is my son? Where is the prince?”

“His Highness the Crown Prince is in the process of replenishing his energy.”

Lionel now blamed himself even more. His son had performed a transfusion to change the nature of the mana held by another. How much effort had been spent to achieve this?

He wasn’t sure, but he knew that his body must’ve been hungry, and his son, the future of the kingdom, had surely expended a great amount of energy.

Lionel still considered his eldest son to be far too foolish. On the other hand, the fact that his son had used the elixir on his father, a substance considered to be a heavenly treasure, felt good to the king.

His judgment was so confused and conflicted that he couldn’t easily speak. He only smiled, but the Marquis of Bielefeld then smiled gently. He said only half of the elixir was used for treatment and that the Crown Prince had kept the other half.

Those words comforted Lionel quite a bit.

“I have to go to my son.”

When Lionel started to move, intent on going to the Palace of the First Prince, Marshal Bielefeld stepped up and held him back.

“For the time being, the Crown Prince has to be disciplined to recover his energy, so he asked that your Majesty not visit him before he can come out on his own. He told me to ask your Majesty to finish the rest of the work.”

“The child struggled so much to heal my body that he injured himself,” Lionel said and turned to Siorin Kirgayen. “Prepare yourself to report everything that happened while I was away.”

“Your Majesty has just recovered from your injury. I don’t think it would be right for me to act so formally.”

Hearing the words of the Prime Minister, King Lionel just laughed.

“I’ve never been more energetic and clear-headed in my lifetime than I am now. No, Prime Minister, you should not be worried about me. You should be bringing in the representative of Teuton.”

These weren’t just words; Lionel was really full of vitality. His anxiety, always feeling like he was being chased by something, was no more. And after his worries had disappeared, a lot has changed.

Lionel’s narrow vision broadened, and his narrow thoughts expanded. It felt like he could do a lot of things that he couldn’t do before. Countless things to be done right now came to his mind, and the king did not delay.

His emotions were different from the anxious impatience that had ruled his life as an incompetent monarch. Now, he was filled with motivation and passion. Lionel also had the same sense of purpose of his youth that he had lost after numerous frustrations and failures.

“Prime Minister, you should not delay for the sake of courtesy.”

Lionel’s voice was more energetic than ever before, and his eyes were glowing with a sparkling fervor that could almost be heard sizzling in the silence.

Seeing this, the Prime Minister and Great Marshal could not resist and accepted his order. And so, they left the king’s bedside.

And at that time, Prince Adrian Leonberger, who had complicated the king’s judgment, was locked up in his palace. His state was completely different than he had made the king and others people believe it to be. He was not resting to regain his depleted energy.

“No way… My true body had rejected me because of my oath to the royal family!”

In his hand, he held a shining royal sword.

CHAPTER 225
DEEP DARKNESS IS A HARBINGER OF THE COMING DAWN (5)

It was a simple act of healing.

The enormous amount of mana the king had gained and the metamorphism his body had gone through was only an incidental income; the essence of what I had done was to heal the king's wounds.

I had just wanted the king to live; it was that simple.

I wasn't hoping for a reward, and I never wished for anything more. However, for that selfless act, an outspoken reward was given to me: Dragon Slayer, my body.

My body, which had remained silent, as if sealed, finally responded.

Its reaction was completely different from what I expected.

'Hwaak!'

After completing the king's treatment and returning to my room, my true body suddenly began to emit light.

At the same time, a tremendous chill flowed from it.

My fingertips froze in an instant, a bone-freezing chill that invaded into my shoulders from my hands. Frightened, I quickly summoned my energy and resisted the chill.

After fighting against the cold for a long time, the light of my true body, which had radiated brilliantly, faded. The great coldness also disappeared. My body returned to the state of a normal sword as if nothing had happened. It was absurd, but because it was my body, I knew what this reaction meant.

It was the reaction you'd see if it didn't like something. It was rebelling; it was grumpy.

Still, I don't know if the act of trying to freeze the soul of a human being could be termed as mere rebellion or grumpiness.

"Ha."

It had been a great jolt of frost, but because I had known what I was doing, I didn't get a fever. I was more embarrassed than angry, and the embarrassing thing was that the thing that didn't like me was me. A body that rejects its souls: I was beyond embarrassed; I was ashamed.

Regardless of my emotions, my true body remained silent. It was like when I had first reunited with it. However, my body, as it currently was, was not the same as it had been then. I was sure: It was watching me. The odd gaze that I occasionally felt was proof. The purpose of that gaze was probably to judge my qualifications.

"Have you ever seen such a cheeky guy?"

Where else in the world would you find someone who treats his other half like this?

It was absurd, but it wasn't that I didn't understand. The body I occupied was merely a usual type of body. After hundreds of years of gaining knowledge and experience and raising countless knights, I was only able to become a Master after taking the elixir. I had reconstructed my human body to overcome its limitations to some extent, but it was not perfect. It was still not enough to pass the judgment of a supreme artifact with numerous [Heroic] and [Mythic] poems.

If I had been like I originally was in this flesh body, my true body wouldn't have even reacted, let alone been cranky. But now, I had the karma to overcome the bodily qualities that I lacked.

In addition to the heroic battle I had won by killing the Warlord, I had the karma of numerous other feats supporting me. But my body still saw me in my weak human body, which gets stepped on from time to time, and it might feel that every time that happens, its soul gets trampled.

It would be a waste to hide away, but it might be unwise to bare its full power and make me drunk on that right away. I'm sure this was how my true body saw the

situation. So: It couldn't do this, it couldn't do that, it could only be grumpy.

If I was in its position, it was unlikely that I would have acted otherwise. I instinctively convinced myself of this. The question was, why did the main body start showing interest in me only now?

Not so long ago, it didn't react to me at all, even if I held onto it and shook it around. There was nothing different between then and now; at least, I thought so. After contemplating it, I found out the reason. The answer lay in my friend's will.

'Please take care of my descendants.'

Four hundred years ago, my friend asked me to take care of his descendants, and I replied that I would – and my friend died.

I fell asleep waiting for someone to come to me to so that I could keep my promise. I slept for a whopping four hundred years.

In the meantime, the kingdom established by my friend became a vassal state of an empire that would be hard to war against. The descendants of my friend had to live in humiliation and dishonor through the generations. It wasn't by my intention, but as a result, I had failed in keeping the promise made to my friend. It was a very unfair situation for me.

There were actual reasons for it, though.

Firstly, it wasn't that I didn't keep my promise, but rather that I didn't have the opportunity to keep it. My friend's descendants didn't wield me, leaving me deep in the palace.

Secondly, Gwangryong had been a mighty being, and in my battle with that mad dragon, I expended a lot of energy. I had needed time to regain the energy I had lost.

Well, it was definitely my fault that I didn't wake up even when my friend's descendants came to me later on. I became aware of my faults, so I tried to correct them. Even now, I am doing my best to restore the kingdom to its original state. I believed, in that way, I could fulfill the obligations of the oath I had forgotten. But it wasn't so; regardless of my efforts, the pledge still remained unfulfilled.

My friend's request was to take care of his descendants, not to take care of the

kingdom.

And strictly speaking, all the efforts I had made were for the Leonberg Kingdom, not the Leonberger family. I have never done anything directly for my friend's scions.

The only action I had taken was to save the king from dying. At that time, I just wanted to preserve his life, but as a result, it became an act that prevented the entropy that might have come upon me. It wasn't just the king's wounds that I had healed.

My soul was being gradually damaged without my knowledge after I had forgotten the oath. And my soul was also one of the things I had healed.

I laughed, for I had saved the king, healed my soul, and gained a sliver of True Silver.

I had thrown a single stone and killed three rabbits – why not laugh?

Still, I only laughed for a while. As I stopped, I lifted my true body and glared at it.

"It's not long before you're begging me to leave you alone."

My body trembled at my words – as if it was excited.

Whether it was or not, I grabbed it tighter and growled, almost screamed, "Just as I am not free of my oath, neither are you."

As long as the Leonberger family's blood coursed through my veins, my body had no choice but to accept my mastery of it over time. And at that time, the power that my true body possessed would also be mine. As I thought about that upcoming day, laughter came from me, and I laughed out loud.

Then I suddenly stopped laughing and hardened my expression.

"This isn't anything crazy."

It was ridiculous for me to threaten my body.

* * *

I stayed in my room, not going outside for a while. I couldn't go anywhere because of

the grumpiness that flared from my body from time to time. I saw it as a necessary process and received its mounting enthusiasm with joy. After four days, Carls came to me while I sat on my bed.

“You’re here? You told me that you’re busy these days.”

“The Count of Stuttgart kept me busy.”

There were rumors that the palace knight commander had been paying attention to Carls, grooming him as his successor, and it seemed to be true. The little old knight wouldn’t have kept summoning Carls without cause. I was playfully trying to convey my congratulations in advance, but Carls suddenly became excited.

“Recently, unusual rumors are circulating in the palace,” Carls said.

“Rumors? What do- Wait a minute,” I said with a frown, because my body was getting excited again.

“Get back,” I ordered Carls, in case he got caught up in it, and immediately summoned my energy and resisted the chill. As usual, my body remained grumpy until it felt my energy and only relented in freezing me after I battled with it.

“Woo,” I gave a lengthy exhale as I started removing the chill that had penetrated my body of flesh, but as I felt a gaze on me, I turned my head.

Carls was staring at me.

“I was about to tell your Highness of rumors about a strange cold that was flowing out of your palace.”

Carls’ narrowed eyes and frowning faced seemed to be nagging me to tell him what was going on right away.

“Oh, that’s no big deal.”

“Is that true? Your Highness’s right hand doesn’t usually look like that.”

I broke eye contact with Carls and saw that my right hand was frozen stiff with the cold that I had not yet completely shaken from myself. I frowned as I gathered up mana and channeled it into my right hand. When I squeezed and clenched my fist,

the layer of ice that was covering the entire hand shattered at once.

“Is your Highness okay?” Carls frowned.

“Is there anything wrong with me conducting individual training?” I demanded.

“Is there any reason in this world to freeze one’s own body?” he retorted.

“I haven’t heard of such methods, no. But as long as I remain strong, he will not be able to freeze my body. Don’t worry, I don’t plan to take my own life at such a young age,” I responded insincerely, and Carls narrowed his eyes even further.

“Then what is that cold?”

I thought about it for a while and then quietly showed him my body.

“It’s because this guy is a little bit angry.”

Carls’ expression suddenly turned white at my words.

“Abandon that sword right now!”

“This is a royal sword.”

Carls stiffened.

“Your Highness, if you can’t throw it away, keep it away from yourself. Because when I felt that cold from afar a while ago, I noticed dangerous energies within it,” Carls said as he lowered his voice, his gaze nailed onto my true body.

He looked at it as if seeing something ominous, even a cursed object.

I wasn’t in the mood for his concerns.

“Your Highness… There was a lot of talk saying that His Highness the Third Prince became a madman because of this sword. I am worried that there is a curse that no one knows about, so I can’t dare- I can’t bear it if your Highness takes such risk.”

It did seem that Carls believed my body to be magically cursed. Of course, he was right in a way, but the process I was currently going through was different from the

time the third prince had been enthralled. At that time, the prince had merely been a sacrifice. I was a wielder, a solicitor, not a sacrifice. Besides, I believed my true body felt very sorry for me.

“Okay. You’re just seeing it. Know that this cold holds no threat to me at all.”

“I know this is not the first time!”

Carls began pouring out words, his face showing great concern. He told me that in the middle of the night, a sudden burst of cold had erupted, and the on-call knight came to my room, seeing me lying on my bed, frozen stiff. And besides, he said, I skipped all my meals, not touching a morsel. When the maid, who thought it was strange, checked the dishes, she found that the food was frozen.

I frowned. Internally, I cursed my cranky body while I looked at the worried Carls.

“Okay, okay.”

“I’m saying that your Highness will get hurt.”

“Oh… You don’t have to care about that. I don’t.”

‘It’s okay, it’s okay’: No matter how much I said this, Carls didn’t stop his nagging.

If things went on like this, his worries would be frying on the metaphorical plate of my ears non-stop until the day’s end.

“Carls.”

“Yes, your Highness?”

“This procedure is done to make sure Dragon Slayer recognizes me as its master.”

“What is that-”

“The founder of our kingdom went through the same process.”

Carls shut his mouth as he heard my very sincere words.

I wasn’t lying. In fact, I used to be just as grumpy as this when I felt that the behavior

of my overly-just friend cramped my style too much. Me using the founder's name on Carls was an excellent ploy on my part, but the effect proved to be rather excessive.

"Your Highness…"

Carls looked at me with respect-filled eyes. He always looked at me like that, but today, his awe was far greater.

"If it wasn't for your Highness, who would ever have dared to be recognized by Dragon Slayer? This is an achievement that even the successive monarchs of our great kingdom could not achieve. I, the humble knight Carls Ulrich, simply admire and stand in awe of your Highness's power."

It's not that the kings have failed to master me. It was rather that I had slept too deeply. Seeing Carls look at me with blind faith and fanaticism, I swallowed the words that had crept into my throat.

"I have to tell others about this right now," Carls excitedly said.

"Until I have-"

"His Majesty is very worried. He heard that your Highness was exhausted in the course of his treatment. His Majesty is constantly worried about whether there is anything wrong with your body," Carls said, and his ass began shaking, so eager was he to spread the news.

A burst of vain laughter came from me.

Carls' sincere and thoughtful behavior was why I trusted him more than any other palace knight. At first, he had remained silent about the story of the maids and knights who had seen me frozen, and I figured Carls had come to visit me just to hear my voice and see if I was okay.

It wasn't a bad feeling to have such a man be privy to my personal affairs. Well, if I let him leave now, he would probably begin shouting out loud that a master of the Dragon Slayer has finally been born to the royal family.

"Carls, because the sword has not fully recognized me, please tell others about this a little later."

For the time being, I closed Carls' excited mouth with appropriate words. I was about to spend a long time with my true body, and I wanted to avoid the hustle and bustle of people.

And so, I avoided the hassle of visitors – until one from the Kingdom of Teuton came looking for me.

CHAPTER 226
SOMETIMES IT HAS A SOFTER APPEAL THAN A SWORD (1)

Hestia Neumann Tudor felt terribly nervous.

It had been a long time since the Crown Prince promised to deal exclusively with her in dwarven weapons; long after all the details for the alliance had been coordinated.

All that had to be done was for the representatives of both sides to sign the document and conclude the agreement. However, the personnel of the Leonberg kingdom, who seemed to be finished with their work, suddenly began dragging out negotiations.

When Hestia asked them what the reason was for the sudden change in attitude, the Crown Prince's name eventually came out.

Hestia immediately sought out the prince.

"What part of the deal don't you like?" Hestia asked, "Why the hell aren't the negotiations finished?"

"Please wait."

"How long on earth do you want me to wait? As your Highness knows, the negotiations can become difficult if our Duke of Seymour comes out of his room. There will be nothing for you to gain if you delay proceedings."

"I'll tell you soon, so wait."

The prince just told Hestia to wait, repeating himself like a parrot. And if she was told to wait, she had to wait; it was the prince's side that held the hilt. One day passed, and another day passed. The Crown Prince had said he would send a message. Hestia waited and waited; no news came.

She again went to the prince with a tight heart. But the Crown Prince refused to see her.

Hestia visited many times, but the result was the same: She couldn't even enter the prince's palace, being sent away by his knights. In the meantime, news came that the King of Leonberg was about to return. King Lionel's feud with his firstborn was a famous story even in the distant Teuton.

It was the story of the eldest son of the Leonberger family who gained his father's hatred and was driven to the north. The king's son earned a great triumph there, but instead of acknowledging his child's contributions, the king gave him the meaningless position of delegation leader and threw him into the Empire. It was said that the king then forced his son to be confined to the palace because he had lived a reckless existence in the Empire, barely returning with his life. The rumors went that if it were not for the war with the Empire, Prince Adrian would never have been released from confinement.

Because the current situation was uncertain, Hestia was worried that the feud between the two royal men would affect the negotiations. She had heard that the King of Leonberg was a somewhat emotional, somber, and dark monarch, a father who dismissed and opposed the works of his firstborn. Hestia was now in a hurry, so she went to the Crown Prince's palace more and more to ask for visits. Of course, again, the Crown Prince did not grant her requests.

Hestia blamed herself.

It seems that she had been too optimistic about the negotiations. After settling the agreement, she had become overly excited that she would gain a monopoly over the trade in dwarven weapons. Hestia had not guessed that matters would be upset like this.

The situation wasn't good.

To make matters worse, via the Rosethorn Knights, Hestia learned of Duke Seymour's success in regaining control of his mind to some degree.

The fact that these foreigners of Leonberg had so far made only verbal promises and could change their minds at any time was unbearable to Hestia. But what truly bothered her was the fact that even when things have gotten to this point, she was

still unable to give up her expectations because of the Crown Prince's words.

Prince Adrian was different from other men.

There was a strange magical power in his words, the ability to make his listeners expect them to become true. Had it not been for him, Hestia would never have dreamed of actually rising above the oppression of Teuton's men.

"Hestia, Hestia, Hestia. You believe in him even in this situation. What can I do with you?" she sighed.

While Hestia was occupied with her troubles, the King of Leonberg finally returned.

And shortly after the king returned, Hestia learned that the Crown Prince had been completely confined to his palace. He said he was not feeling well.

A man who was strong enough to trample on the Duke of Seymour, named the Number One in the West, was now a sick man. It was a lie that even a child would not believe. Hestia believed it was just a consequence of the feud in the Leonberger family and that it now affected Teuton.

And one day, the King of the Leonberg sent a messenger to Hestia.

"His Majesty says that he will be waiting for Teuton's representative in his hall at noon tomorrow."

To Hestia, it sounded as if the messenger was saying that a meeting would be held on the next day to cancel the negotiations. It was the moment when her faith in the Crown Prince, which had not wavered until the end, became dubious.

The next day was bright, and Hestia was neatly attired when she headed for the hall.

And there she met the monarch of the Leonberg kingdom.

"I, Hestia Neumann, of Teuton's Tudor family, greets the Lord of the Leonberg Kingdom. It is an honor to meet your Majesty on this day."

"I am also very happy to meet the most outstanding rose that the Tudor family so boasts of for the first time in my life."

Formal greetings came and went.

Hestia bowed her head and began calculating how she should react to the king.

“I have heard of your Majesty’s circumstances and am glad that you are no longer in distress.”

“The agreement between Teuton and Leonberg will come true,” the king said quietly.

The unexpected words made Hestia raise her head, and for the first time, she saw the king’s face.

The man’s face was strangely familiar, and he seemed to be in his mid-thirties. The only difference was that the Crown Prince had not yet been beset by age, and if Hestia had to name the prime difference, it would be that the king’s temperament was much softer.

“You must have thought that I would end the agreement between our two countries.”

Hestia couldn’t stop herself from nodding.

“Would it perhaps be because you thought the feud between my son and me would affect Teuton? It would not be strange at all if you thought so.

“I didn’t mean it in such a manner, your Majesty,” Hestia hurriedly apologized and bowed her head, only then realizing how rude it had been for her to nod.

The king smiled generously and accepted her apology, adding, “Everything that my son promised will come true.”

The king said that the Crown Prince’s promises would be fulfilled.

“Thank you, Sire.”

Hestia bowed deeply and praised the king’s decision. Inside her mind, she was cursing Teuton’s spies. A dreamer who dreamed of independence from the Empire without being able to claim it; an old king who was struck by depression and looked much older than his age; a narrow-minded father who envied and hated his handsome son: None of what they had said was correct.

The look of the king, clearly that of a dreamer, was far too clear to be possessed by a person pursuing vain dreams. His appearance, which they had said was decrepit, rather seemed ten years younger than his age. In addition, even if he had only spoken a few words, the king's voice contained a tone of absolute trust when he referred to the prince.

After that, the king expressed concerns over Hestia's health, saying that young people had to be discipline themselves to take care of their bodies properly, spoke a few more casual words with her, and then sent her out.

"Ah…"

After leaving the hall, Hestia's body relaxed, and she almost staggered in relief. But she soon corrected her posture and expression.

"Does your Highness need more time? If possible, we would like to complete a detailed review of the matter today."

Members of Leonberg's government who participated in the negotiations were waiting for her.

"The same holds true for me."

Hestia read the document prepared by the kingdom's officials. It bore the seal of the Leonberger royal family.

"This is exactly what we agreed upon."

Hestia did not hesitate to stamp down Teuton's seal on the spot.

Thus, the alliance between Teuton and Leonberg was formed. It was the moment when the princess, who had been forced to bloom in a garden like a flower because she was a woman, gained the powerful political leverage of possessing a monopoly on the trade of dwarven armaments.

And soon afterward, Duke Seymour had managed to shake off his defeat and made his appearance in the palace.

"His Majesty has commanded the consolidation of this alliance through marriage. Why have you done this arbitrarily, princess?"

The duke had never shown any hate toward Hestia. His face now did not show that he was angry with her; rather, it was as cold as ever. His eyes were alert, though, as if looking at something disagreeable.

Hestia was not sure about it, but she thought that if this wasn't the royal palace of another country, the duke might have already felt very angry.

Hestia felt deep ridicule grow inside of her; that the feelings of love her uncle had shown her thus far were so shallow! It was only when she existed as a flower in a garden that the duke saw sweet affection as meaningful! Hestia's father was no different. No, almost all Teutons were like this.

What they loved was an obedient and beautiful princess, not a princess who would dare share in their power.

"What his Majesty wanted is a solid alliance. Marriage was just one of the avenues we could have taken to attain this. Marriage does not have to be the sole premise for such treaties."

Hiding her resentment, Hestia tried to politely persuade the Duke of Seymour.

"The goal of this mission was to ally with them through marriage. How can't you know that it goes against his Majesty's dignity for a princess not to complete the task given to her, but rather to arbitrarily interpret his Majesty's will?"

But Duke Seymour didn't listen to her. In the past, she would have bowed her head to the admonitions of the duke and simply said sorry.

"Duke Seymour. If you state that his Majesty's name should be held in the greatest esteem, then you must know that your current behavior is insulting toward his Majesty, who appointed me to be in charge of this delegation."

But not now; now, Hestia Neumann was no longer a powerless princess, longing for the gentle respect and affection of others.

Duke Seymour's expression hardened.

"I didn't mean it like that. I was just worried that you would be reprimanded by his Majesty, princess."

“I have completed his Majesty’s mission. Don’t you think that us trading in dwarven armaments should be praised as an unexpected income and success that his Majesty didn’t expect?”

Duke Seymour could not answer her question. He just looked at her with a little confusion and even greater alertness. Hestia really liked the look: It felt as if they had entered an equal relationship now. Hestia had no intention of turning her uncle, who held near-absolute power in Teuton, into her enemy, however.

“I’m already looking forward to it, uncle: How majestic will it not be when the Rosethorn Knights are armed with dwarven weapons?”

At her words, the duke, who had been about to speak, closed his mouth.

“Treasures must have owners, and the same holds for sharp swords made by dwarves. But unfortunately, I don’t have the eye to tell good and bad weapons apart. I need a knight who is good at seeing the value in swords and good enough to be their master.”

Hestia drew the sword the prince had offered at the contest.

“Like this one, uncle.”

Then she swung it freely.

The duke’s expression changed, and greed emerged in the place of displeasure and alertness.

It was a face Hestia had never before seen upon her uncle. After all, the duke was a proud knight who had even given up the throne to complete his path with the sword. However, that great pride had now been crushed by the eldest son of Leonberg’s royal family.

“If these weapons will be a boon to our kingdom, even though it is not what we came here for, then why not be glad about it?”

And, as always, it was martial power that the duke valued above all else.

“I will be happy to cooperate with you, princess.”

A lovely grin boomed on Hestia's face. As beautiful as a rose, with a smile as sharp as a rose's thorn.

* * *

Hestia had been about to tell the king of her return home, about to say her goodbyes.

"I hope that Teuton will also participate in the upcoming banquet as our ally. Will you attend?"

"I can only apologize for being unable to do so because of an urgent situation in my home country."

Hestia looked down again and again and tried to say the parting greeting she had prepared.

"I will be choosing the Crown Princess at the upcoming banquet. Since it is a matter of state and long overdue, the ceremony will also be held as soon as possible. I thought the event would become more meaningful if it included congratulations from our allies. However, you have said that there is an urgent situation in Teuton, so I cannot be greedy and keep you from your journey any longer."

Hestia had certainly intended to depart before she heard the purpose of the banquet.

"If that's the case, I should attend!" Hestia cried out the moment she heard the reason, unable to stop herself.

"I remember you saying that there was an urgent situation in your home country."

"It's not as urgent as attending our ally's marriage celebration, and as ambassadors, offer our congratulations."

The king laughed and thanked Hestia.

Thus, the princess and Teuton's delegation delayed their return to attend a banquet in the Leonberg kingdom.

* * *

As busy as I was, the moment someone had asked me for an audience, I would have

rejected it outright. But I couldn't, and it wasn't because the status of those who visited was high.

Rather, it was the opposite. They were barons, or at best, viscounts. My visitors were lesser nobles of the kingdom. It was not easy to refuse them an audience, as they were the rural lords who had kept their positions while the unscrupulous high lords and high-ranking nobles who had joined the Empire had been done away with.

"Yes, it's been a while, Baron Tailheim."

The baron, who had a gentle bearing, fell flat on his face and asked for my forgiveness.

"I should have greeted your Highness when I saw you, but I'm sorry I couldn't."

"I am at fault as well. I should have told you the news from Taylor, but I was so busy… I was far too busy."

"I just believed that no news was good news and that he would be in safe hands serving under your Eternal Highness."

After exchanging conventional greetings, I immediately asked why they had come to the capital.

"All the nobles of the kingdom have been summoned by his Majesty to the capital to attend the banquet."

I thought that the banquet that Baron Tailheim was talking about was a simple victory celebration.

"My congratulations in advance. I hope your Highness can find a wife that suits your wise Highness."

But it was not.

"What?"

When I frowned at his outrageous words and asked what he meant, Baron Tailheim answered me with his eyes wide open.

“I heard that it is a banquet to arrange your Highness’s marriage… Did your Highness not know?”

I didn’t know; I had no idea what had been happening while I was stuck in the palace and playing with my true body.

“It is said that this event will not only be attended by the nobles of our kingdom, but also envoys from other countries. I heard that most of them are accompanied by young women of the leading families of their respective realms. Your Highness will take one of them as your Highness’s bride-”

When I heard that, I couldn’t sit still. I jumped up and began to head to the king’s residence right away, but another man entered my palace. It was Siorin.

“Your Highness, are you at this banquet going to-”

“Get out!”

In the next moment, I chased Siorin from my palace, shouting loudly at him.

Then, the princess of Teuton came to me again.

“I thought it would be difficult to convince Duke Seymour of my actions, but it didn’t take anything special.”

“Isn’t that a good thing for you?” I noted.

“It is, but I feel bad. The uncle I had loved as a girl has an uglier heart than I thought him to have,” Hestia confided.

“Are you sure that you want to say that to people from other countries?”

“How are you? I came to see you, anyway.”

“If anyone hears us now, they’ll think we’re close together.”

The princess seemed to be hurt by my words.

“I was very close to your Highness, but it was not mutual.”

“I told you not to act like that in front of me.”

“It would have been great if your Highness was like any other man. If you were, you wouldn’t be cold to me, like you are being now,” Hestia replied with a smile, and it was a sad smile.

“That won’t work. And don’t say anything more like that. I don’t like it that the knights in my country are gossiping about us.”

When I asked Hestia what she had come here to do, she started to speak, and eagerly so. She told me all the bad rumors about a princess of a certain kingdom. Then she told me about others, saying that their faces were completely different once they removed their makeup. One princess was said to have a nasty personality and couldn’t find someone to marry her in her own country.

Hestia’s expression became twisted, her behavior distorted, as she related to me all the gossip she knew.

“What about it? So what?” I asked her, annoyed. Instead of answering me, she kept gossiping about women I had never even heard of.

“I don’t know how your Highness doesn’t see it as a big problem after I’ve just told you everything. You said you weren’t inspired by my appearance in any way. If I’m not adequate, they surely won’t be.”

“I don’t know what the hell you want to say to me.”

“I just don’t want you to be fooled by their fox-like natures, failing to see what they hide,” the princess said, then said a bunch of other stuff, and left.

“What is this?” I frowned, clucked my tongue, and headed straight to the king’s chamber.

“His Majesty is in the bath.”

The king did not meet with me.

“His Majesty is tired and taking a nap.”

“His Majesty has just gone to bed…”

The king made up all sorts of little excuses not to see me. I trembled at his betrayal.

Damn, I didn’t save you for this!

CHAPTER 227
SOMETIMES IT HAS A SOFTER APPEAL THAN A SWORD (2)

As time passed, more and more people visited my palace.

Among them were lesser lords of the provinces and some of the few remaining greater lords of the kingdom. They had made my life very messy.

I felt like being a bad host and wanted to get rid of all the visitors, but I couldn't.

Half of those who had visited me were fathers who had entrusted their children to me in the north; the other half were comrades who had risked their lives and faced death in the last war.

If the nobles had not guessed my temper to some extent, had not chosen to greet me simply, I would have run from my palace, no longer able to endure their visits.

"No, will I really sneak away?"

I started to think seriously and decided I had to run away. I could hide myself in the north for a while and say I'll come back after completing my work. I thought it was a pretty good solution.

I decided to put my plan into action. Deep into the dark night, I quietly left my room. And just as I was about to cross the wall: "The Crown Prince is gone!"

One instant later, a familiar voice came from inside my palace. It was Carls.

"Send a signal!"

That moment, 'Buwooo hoo'

I heard the sound of a horn that would only be heard on the battlefield.

‘Hwaak’

Fires were lit up everywhere.

“All knights! Head to your positions!”

“Inform the gatekeeper to close all gates!”

The sound of the palace knights and the royal palace guards shouting out orders broke into my ears.

“Find your charge!”

Among the voices came one filled entirely with dignity, the voice of the palace knight commander. The scene looked like a battlefield.

“I found our charge!”

While I was staring blankly at it all, the palace knights found me and started shouting. And so, my first breakout failed. I did not give up and tried again, and once again, I failed.

My second attempt was foiled by the utterly unexpected installation of a magical alarm device. The third attempt failed because the palace knight commander and other champions had blocked off my front. I couldn’t make a fourth attempt at all because the palace knights didn’t sleep while they constantly watched me.

A double, then triple siege of my palace was created by mobilizing all the kingdom’s champions. It was absurd. It was hard to tell whether I was in the royal palace or whether I was in the middle of the enemy camp.

But there was something really ridiculous.

“How can you do this to me?” I demanded, trembling with a sense of betrayal.

Arwen and Eli stood in front of me: The champions I had raised myself, the traitors who had foiled my second attempt.

“Sorry.”

“His Majesty himself gave the command. What strength do we have to disobey?”

Arwen was the one who had bowed her head and apologized, while Eli was the one who had spoken brazenly. I looked at them and sighed. No, nothing would change if I blamed them now.

According to their words, the king himself had stepped forward and ordered my confinement.

Besides, it was all my fault that my plans had failed once and for all.

My sin for putting too much trust in the knowledgeable Carls? First Failure.

The error of bringing the wizards of the White Night Tower into the palace? Second failure.

The crime of raising Arwen and Eli as Masters? Third failure.

“This is all my karma coming back to me.”

The phrase ‘biting the hand that feeds you’ was appropriate in this case. On that day, I promised in front of my knights that there would be no more attempts to escape.

Of course, if I really decided to leave the palace, there was nothing they could do. However, it would be impossible even for me to escape the siege and the champions without making a fuss.

At other times, I would not have been concerned about creating such a tumult, but now was a time when envoys from other countries were visiting the palace.

It would only reduce the status of Leonberg were I to so openly escape the palace by barging past the knights of my own country like a madman.

It was funny that I, who had already caused a lot of turmoil, now thought about the status of the kingdom. In any case, I gave up escaping, and the palace was able to regain a semblance of peace.

Time passed without much happening, and finally, the banquet was one day away.

“His Majesty is looking for your Highness.”

It was then that the king sought me out – the king who didn't want to see me when I had asked to meet him. I went straight to his room.

"Did you eat? It's still before dinner. Let's dine together."

The king brazenly pretended that nothing had happened.

I wanted to ask about it all right away, but I decided to sit down for now.

I was just hungry, and it would not be too late to protest his actions after that.

The king and I were quietly devoted to eating.

"Thank you, Ian."

When the plates in front of us were almost empty, the king opened his mouth.

"I'm sorry for setting things in motion before asking you first."

The king looked at me like never before, his eyes soft.

"But for me… I couldn't bear the thought of an empty throne."

The king added that, after passing so near the gates of death, he realized how important it was that the family live on in a new generation, and as both a father and a monarch, it was an unavoidable decision for him to take.

"So, this time, I just hope you will understand my heart in this matter."

In the past, this great man would have cared nothing about my intentions, and he would have made a lot of noise about how it was my duty as Crown Prince. Now, he was talking to me in an earnest tone.

I was speechless, my emotions of revolt suppressed. The words of protest I had prepared in advance could not even be brought to the tip of my tongue.

The king continued to try and convince me for a long time after that. He didn't want much; he just wanted me to find a partner. He only hoped that the future of the royal family would be solidified. All of those words were hard to accept for me at that moment.

“I know what you’re thinking. You think that if you get married, you will continue to fight on the battlefield. Then if something goes wrong, the marriage will be shaken because you are unable to take responsibility for those who will be left behind.”

Although the king’s reasoning was somewhat different, it ran along the lines of me not wanting the burden of a relationship and the responsibility it would entail.

“If you see it as a political burden, then also think of it as a political agreement.” Your partner will also think so.”

The king continued his attempt at persuasion for a while, changing his tone. When I still didn’t answer, the king offered me a compromise.

“Just sit down and watch.”

Knowing that the king had made the greatest possible concessions, I could not refuse the offer.

“I will just watch. If there is no woman who claims my heart-”

“Don’t force me either.”

After the conversation, I stood up right away. If I sat there any more, I might develop more annoying lumps. I escaped the king’s room as if running away and headed for my palace when I suddenly came to a halt and looked back.

“I feel like I was hit by something.”

For some reason, I felt like things had played out just as the king had intended.

“Ah, I don’t know,” I mumbled. I had told him I would just sit; so, I would go to the banquet and just sit. After thinking so, the unpleasantness in my mind grew a little less.

* * *

The Marquis of Bielefeld visited the king’s residence.

“Your Majesty, Marshal Bielefeld is here to visit.”

When the palace knight told him of the marquis' visit, the king himself came out and opened the door.

"Sire," the marquis bowed his head and greeted the king politely as if regretful to bother him, but he did not forget to study his monarch's expression. The king looked delighted, and that was surely why the ruler of the country had come to open the door personally.

"The meeting seems to have ended well," Bielefeld noted.

"Now that I've got him to attend the banquet, half the battle's won."

As Bielefeld had expected, it had gone well.

"As you have said, marquis, the child, despite his strong temperament, could not go against my will, even if the prospect seemed to sicken him."

The king smiled as he looked at the chair upon which the prince had sat a while ago.

"His Highness acts inherently strong against the strong and is weak against the weak. Of course, I am not saying that your Majesty is weak."

"I understand what you're trying to say, marquis. I even felt it myself."

The king smiled, adding, "I heard that the flowing wind cuts through the hard rocky mountain, and today was a perfect example of it."

King Lionel seemed to feel quite good.

"My son is like a rocky mountain, but because he thought his father couldn't figure out his nature, I just pressed him with kindness. How could he orchestrate a backlash against that, or feel resentment?"

The marquis nodded as if sympathizing with the king's words.

"He's such a compliant child."

However, after hearing that statement, Bielefeld could not sympathize at all with the king's words.

Complaint? Who the hell- Prince Adrian?

“Hmm.” The marquis chose to hide the dissent in his heart.

“Just because your Majesty has convinced the Crown Prince, who possesses not only the character of a rock-hard mountain but also the free-spiritedness of the wind, please do not relax until the end.” Bielefeld urged the king to be vigilant to the last, as he himself did not know in which direction the prince would bounce.

“I will keep that in kind,” said the king, readily accepting the marquis’ warning, as if he had understood the nature of his firstborn.

“The things you prepared should work.”

“I am afraid of disappointing your Majesty if everything doesn’t go as planned.”

“You did everything you could. How can one make a person’s heart move according to a plan?” the king mused with a stern face, adding, “If you can’t do it once, you can try two, three, ten times… There are so many other reasons for holding a banquet, anyway.”

“Since we have compensation from the Empire, there is no shortage of finances.”

The marquis looked full of satiety as he reminisced about the warehouse filled with imperial reparation funds. The king was also very pleased with this.

“I will take a drink,” King Lionel said as he filled two wine glasses and offered one to the marquis.

“Please, I hope we will not have a dry toast this time.”

Then the king raised his glass and said, “For Ian.”

“For His Highness the Crown Prince.”

The king and the marquis exchanged deep glances as they clinked their glasses.

It was that very moment that a conspiracy began in the heart of the kingdom, one which the Crown Prince remained unaware of.

And so, the night passed, and finally, the day of the banquet came.

* * *

“Wow.”

I frowned. Even after waking up, my head was not clear. Perhaps it was because of my fierce dreams. I was channeling my mana and brushing away my frown when someone knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened at my words. Through the wide portal, maids and attendants appeared in a neat row.

“Your Highness, we will help you prepare.”

There was still a long time left before the evening’s banquet. On previous occasions, I had been unaware of what these things entailed and had allowed the maids to go over me, and then waited a long time for the banquet to begin, unable to lie down properly. Not this time.

“Not now. Later.” 3333

Hearing my words, the maids replied straight away, showing no signs of embarrassment.

“Then we will come back around noon.”

I had the fierce suspicion that they had expected this to be my reaction.

I spent my entire morning roaming about. Even those who have constantly been in and out of my palace weren’t looking for me today. Everyone seemed busy because it was the day of the banquet.

That was fortunate for me. I was already disgusted that I was forced to attend a banquet that I was reluctant to have in the first place. I only wandered around until noon, however.

The maids appeared like drawn swords at the promised time.

“Oh, this is annoying,” I complained.

“If your Highness delays further now, you will not be on time.”

While I profusely acted in an uncooperative fashion, the maids looked at me with beseeching, almost pathetic eyes. Their glances were filled with many words. If there went anything wrong with preparing me for the matchmaking banquet, it was the maids who would be greatly inconvenienced.

Their faces looked despondent, as if something untoward had already happened. I couldn’t turn away from those desperate eyes of theirs, so I sat down, and they started leading me in proceedings.

“Then we’ll start. Don’t move for a moment.”

And the suffering began. The maids began rubbing, massaging my body at random – every nook and cranny.

“Ah, why are you doing it there again? I wear clothes anyway. No one can even see it because it is covered!”

“It’s just in case, your Highness, just in case.”

I couldn’t figure out what this ‘case’ was that they were talking about. I just felt that their faces looked weird and spiteful. After a while, I started to doubt whether I was the same person while the maids looked at me with almost pitying faces. Or not, no, the women were merely focused on their work.

In their own way, the royal family’s maids were thick-fingered; even if not as much as Adelia’s, their fingertips were rough.

I gave myself up to the hands of the maids for a long time.

“It’s all done.”

After I was released from their ministrations, they equipped me fully in tailored robes. But just because I was ready didn’t mean that my suffering was over.

Sometimes, when I turned my body because my posture was uncomfortable, the maids rush to me and started to straighten my clothes. Their attentions were more

cumbersome than my discomfort, so I chose to remain still. I closed my eyes and went into meditation.

After done meditating, the time for the banquet was imminent.

“Your Highness, I will take you to the banqueting hall.”

Carls appeared in his armor, which was shining brighter than ever before, and he knelt before me.

I went straight out of my room. Outside the door, fully-armed palace knights with their visors down were waiting for me. Arwen was with them. Although she was helmed and visored, she couldn’t hide her peculiar shape, so it wasn’t difficult to recognize her.

Siorin must be disappointed. Arwen clearly didn’t care about her father’s wishes, and I chuckled as I saw the fully armored Knight of Steel. But I only chuckled for a while.

“Let’s go.”

I led them to the banqueting hall.

‘Chuck Chuck Chuck’

As I walked, listening to the exceptionally clear clanging of their armor, it felt like I was heading to the battlefield – although I did not wear iron armor, but rather a pure white gown.

After walking for a while, we arrived at the banqueting hall.

“Would your Highness like to enter right away?”

As I nodded, the attendant cleared his throat for a moment. At this, he cried out loudly as if the whole palace had to hear.

“The legitimate blood descendant of his Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, who is the modest ruler of the Leonberg kingdom and more precious than anyone else! Eldest son of the Leonberg royal family! Savior of the North! The Northern Lion! The kingdom’s strongest knight! His Highness Adrian Leonberger is entering!”

The door finally opened wide, and I stepped beyond it.

CHAPTER 228
SOMETIMES IT HAS A SOFTER APPEAL THAN A SWORD (2)

In the eyes of the envoys, the nobles of the Leonberg Kingdom were indeed insignificant.

Their country was said to be awesome, but the nobles' clothes were outdated, unfamiliar, of a cut that had become obsolete in continental fashion a long time ago. The knights and great lords deserved to look better, but they too were far from sophisticated.

Their expressions were so hard that they didn't seem to enjoy a banquet, even if it was held to celebrate a victory.

Some of the nobles were even frowning.

This was the first banquet in nearly a hundred years in which envoys from other countries were participating. In the eyes of the envoys, the behavior of the Leonberg nobles seemed as if they feared being faulted by the nobility of other countries.

Although they had won a surprising victory over the Empire, they had yet to abandon the face of a weak country.

The envoys thought so, but their belief was an illusion.

The nobles of the kingdom weren't nervous about being seen as flawed by envoys from other countries.

"Maybe nothing else happens today."

"Yes? It's a meaningful banquet to commemorate our victory, but something will happen."

Leonberg's nobles were rather anxious about what was going on here today.

“That’s it, woo! Now, even hearing that a banquet is to be hosted by the royal family hurts my heart.”

These were nobles who remembered that all of the banquets hosted by the royal family in recent years had not turned out so good, so they were sincerely concerned that this event would be like that.

Of course, not every banquet hosted by the Leonbergers had always turned out to be a bad end.

“No matter how irreverent his Highness the Crown Prince is, there is no way that he will act up again in the presence of nobles from other countries.”

“Don’t forget: even in the presence of the Empire’s ambassador, his Highness did not hesitate.”

The problem was the prince. Incidents and accidents had broken out at all the banquets the Crown Prince had attended.

When the Marquis of Montpellier had still been an ambassador a few years ago, the Crown Prince had ranted in his face. It also wasn’t so long ago that he had led the northern lords and threw the head of an orc in front of the king. And quite recently, the nobles of Leonberg were killed for their sins. All of that happened right here.

Given the circumstances, it would be rather strange if the nobles weren’t feeling nervous.

“Please, I hope today goes by without anything happening.”

In fact, the nobles longed for it.

“May today’s banquet end with a feast to commemorate the kingdom’s victory, as it was intended to do. Furthermore, I hope it will be remembered as the meaningful day when the Crown Princess is accepted into our halls.”

The second prince Maximilian had attended the banquet from early on in order to assuage the nobles’ anxiety, as if he knew what their inner feelings were. “So don’t worry. Enjoy the banquet.”

“Really, today, there is nothing planned by the royal family, or the Crown Prince,

without us nobles knowing?" Count Brandenburg asked Maximilian. He was the master of the Iron Hawk Archers and hoped to rely on his friendship with the second prince after they had fought together on the central front against the orcs.

"The royal family has no purpose for today's banquet other than the commemoration of the victory and the marriage of the Crown Prince. So, you nobles can do away with your worries and just enjoy the banquet."

Hearing this, the count turned away, relieved by Maximilian's answer.

Maximilian sighed as he looked back. In fact, he was also not very sure. Of course, he hadn't told a lie. It was certainly true that the royal family attached no meaning to this banquet other than a victory and betrothal celebration. The problem was the marriage of the Crown Prince.

Maximilian's brother had told him straight up that he wanted nothing to do with marriage. The second prince had been told that the king had laid out everything well, but he was still worried.

"Fwoo. It's a good day. Don't think about anything else."

Maximilian shook off his anxiety and started greeting those envoys from other kingdoms who came to say hello to him. Their mouths moved as they greeted him politely, all the while paying homage to the kingdom's victory. It seemed as if they were frantic to understand the details of Leonberg if even only a little more. Maximilian had become tired of appeasing Leonberg's nobles, but the envoys were worse; they were looking at him with crafty glances in their eyes.

The three-day banquet had just begun, and already Maximilian's neck felt stiff. But even while suffering, Maximilian treated the envoys very seriously – those who have looked down upon the kingdom in the past and those who did not visit the kingdom because they feared catching the Empire's notice. Such people have unhesitatingly traveled a long way to visit Leonberg to build friendships with the kingdom.

Maximilian couldn't chase away future allies due to his irritation. While Maximilian entertained the envoys on behalf of the deceased queen, whose role it traditionally was, the banquet began in earnest.

"The legitimate blood descendant of his Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, who is the modest ruler of the Leonberg kingdom and more precious than anyone else! Eldest

son of the Leonberg royal family! Savior of the North! The Northern Lion! The kingdom's strongest knight! His Highness Adrian Leonberger is entering!"

Maximilian's brother, who could be said to be the event's main personage, finally appeared in the banqueting hall.

"Hail his Highness Adrian Leonberger!"

The musicians who had filled the banquet hall just a little while ago stopped playing, and the nobles knelt and shouted. It was as if they were greeting a king, and Maximilian's brother looked around the hall with a respectful gaze. After he had looked at the nobles' side, his brother suddenly stopped and stared at where the envoys had gathered. He stared at them with transparent eyes, as if seeing their insides.

The envoys who met his eyes froze as they were.

By custom, they had to bow their heads and greet the prince, but they seemed to have forgotten.

At the moment when Maximilian was about to step up and tell the envoys what to do, "A lot of people have gathered," his brother spoke sulkily.

At that moment, the envoys woke up and bowed their heads to pay homage.

Maximilian admired the effect. These envoys had looked at him as if they had oiled their tongues, and with searching gazes; they couldn't even dare to raise their heads in the presence of his brother. They looked like rabbits standing in front of a lion.

'duk, duk, duk'

While Maximilian was staring at the sincerely respectful envoys, he heard footsteps. Suddenly, his brother stood right in front of his nose. Maximilian looked at him with sparkling eyes.

His older brother, who wore only dull armor on every other day, was today dressed in a pure-white gown. So dazzling did his brother look that Maximilian forgot his comportment as a prince and near-shouted, "Look! You can dress well too, brother. The young lion from the north dedicates himself even to his appearance."

“Why are you saying that again?”

“Just because your appearance is so dazzling, brother.”

“It’s so bad,” his brother said with a laugh and headed to the dais. Maximilian followed his brother as he also ascended the platform.

“Everyone can stand up,” the eldest brother said quietly as he sat himself next to the throne.

The nobles rose from their kneeling positions, looked up to the dais, and waited for the prince to open his mouth.

“This is a traditional banquet, so enjoy it to your heart’s content.”

The Marquis of Bielefeld put his hand on his face as the Crown Prince spoke, as it was not much of a congratulatory speech. Siorin Kirgayen sighed. In the eyes of Maximilian, Adrian’s oratory had been manly.

“I don’t care,” Maximilian’s brother said, then buried himself deep in his chair – with a terribly sulking face.

‘Pwap’ someone clapped their hands for the musicians to resume their performance.

Music flowed back into the quieted banqueting hall.

“When will it end?” Maximilian’s brother complained as if already bored.

* * *

In fact, the Kingdom of Leonberg was not very well known.

Geographically, it was located on the continent’s northernmost tip, making transportation to and from its lands difficult. In addition, it had no special trade goods to offer the world, and there was no reason for merchants to risk the inconvenience of making the long trek.

The tremendous tariffs and tolls imposed by the Empire were one of the reasons people stopped visiting the kingdom.

However, know that some foreign scholars at least had a decent knowledge of history. They knew that the origin of Leonberg was as a country founded by those persecuted by the Empire and that the kingdom's history was marked with wars against the Empire.

For others, the Kingdom of Leonberg was only seen as an underdeveloped country located in the north. Had it not been for the remarkable victory they claimed in the war against the Empire, no one would have come to the kingdom. Now, people wanted to confirm Leonberg's potential and further establish a bond with them. In the past, they wouldn't even have thought of it, fearing to gain the Empire's notice. The status of the Empire after being defeated in wars against Leonberg and Dotrin was no longer the same, however. For the first time, people began to doubt the power of the Empire.

Still, many theorized that the giant Empire and its appearance of being a waning force on the continent might have been a big bluff. And, of course, it would be too dangerous to build up a friendship with the enemy of the Empire if such doubt existed.

The current Empire could not afford to care about foreign affairs, however.

In its southern lands, Hwaryong rampaged, and in the central region, the third and fifth principes were in the midst of waging a civil war for succession to the throne.

For those who planned to move against the Empire, now was the right time. Before they moved, the countries had to confirm the strength of the Leonberg Kingdom, which had won their war against the imperial machine.

If the power of the kingdom is less than expected, it would be a confirmation that the decline of the Empire was so great that even a lesser kingdom had won out against it. If Leonberg's might met expectations, then it meant that a new power had been born on the continent.

Either way, they had nothing to lose.

The problem was the lack of information available to the envoys.

Since arriving on northern soil, Leonberg's troops and knights had taken full control of their delegations. They had to follow military orders until they reached the capital, and as a result, there had been no opportunity for them to search out the faults of

the kingdom.

It was only after they arrived at the royal palace that the envoys could begin to judge the spirit of Leonberg.

“The level of their palace knights is higher than expected. Their energy also seems to be sharpened after they had gained practical experience from a few battles. Their average soldiers also have high morale, and there is no shortage of evidence that says that their military is strict.”

“This… If the palace knights of a single country have been forced to go through a war, then can one use them as a measure on which to judge whether a country is a mess, or truly as strong as it seems?”

The envoys had barely grasped elements of Leonberg’s power, and already they were confused.

After worrying over and over again, they finally came to a conclusion.

“I will judge them after seeing the eldest son of the Leonberger royal family.”

Thus, they waited for the banquet to begin and waited for the moment when the Northern Lion appeared before them.

And finally, they came to face the lion from the north – and his gaze, as if seeing through their souls, and his tremendous presence that overwhelmed the audience.

The envoys couldn’t even breathe properly from the moment when the firstborn son of the Leonberger family appeared.

Far from being able to search out his faults or strengths, they couldn’t even look straight ahead.

The Crown Prince was sitting on a chair upon the dais all the time, with a bored face, but there was no doubt that he was dominating the banqueting hall. The envoys could barely watch the swordsman who had defeated countless imperial paladins.

But they knew: The rumors were true. The Northern Lion that had made the Imperial Army tremble was not a fictional entity.

The moment the envoys realized this, their investigation was over.

Now, it was time to move to build friendships with the kingdom, not search for its faults.

While the envoys were so wrapped up in their own schemes, the monarch of the Leonberg Kingdom appeared in the banqueting hall. And he loudly proclaimed, “If there is someone who wins the heart of the prince, that woman will become the Crown Princess.”

During the banquet, the king said that the heart of the Crown Prince was at stake. He went on to say that it mattered not what titles the woman who earned the prince’s love had or what her country of origin was.

It was an unprecedented, bizarre proclamation, and its effect was extremely frantic.

To the envoys, it sounded as if a political union or alliance that often went hand in hand with royal marriages was up for grabs, not a regrettable prospect at all. It wasn’t true; the king had only declared that he thought that it was sensible for his eldest son, who had no interest in marriage, to marry.

The envoys’ hearts and minds became urgently pressed.

“The plan has changed! Go and tell the princess to get ready!”

“Yeah? The princess will attend the banquet from tomorrow on.”

“Did you say the plan has changed?”

Heralds left the banqueting hall, and the envoys trembled in anticipation.

In the meantime, Leonberg’s nobles were the first to stand before the dais and express their courtesy to the king – each with a beautifully dressed daughter or niece.

At this moment, the princess selection banquet began in earnest.

CHAPTER 229
SOMETIMES IT HAS A SOFTER APPEAL THAN A SWORD (2)

The king looked more confident than ever.

It seemed that his soul, which had faded under despair and failure, had finally recovered its original light.

My heart tickled, and regardless of my will, my mouth kept stinging. The sound of the king's footsteps softly cutting through the middle of the nobles rang in my heart. It really was a strange feeling that I couldn't express.

To define it: "That's cool." I think my emotion was close to one of satisfaction.

I went down from the dais and met the king.

'Tuk.'

The king patted my shoulder lightly and climbed onto the platform. From beneath the dais, I watched the king. When I had first met him, I didn't get along with him at all. But not so now.

I could bet that, even if his current descendants were upon the throne, the position would not fit them better than it does the king. It wasn't just because of the effects of the elixir which the king had taken. The king's present dignity came from the strength he had gained after realizing his true self when faced with death. In addition, it was the character that had been born in him from the beginning but was trampled cruelly by the Empire and eventually broken. Now, he had finally recovered it. The edges of my lips crawled up into a grin.

For a day or so, it wouldn't be bad for me to sit on my throne and stay quiet. It seemed like it would be okay for me to remain seated and have my spirits raised by the king's face.

I thought so, and I was sure that I would do so. If the king hadn't suddenly hit me from behind with his proclamation, I would have done so.

"If there is someone who wins the heart of the prince, that woman will become the Crown Princess."

I became fish-eyed, dumb.

"I don't care about her lineage, her origin and background, or anything."

I looked at the king with my mouth open.

However, the king looked down from the dais and did not even glance at me, even though he must have felt my gaze. I turned my head and found the Marquis of Bielefeld.

'Shh.'

The old marshal had met my gaze then gently turned his head away. I looked at Siorin.

The prime minister was discouraged by seeing his fully-armored daughter, so he wasn't even concerned about my reaction.

I felt sickened with betrayal, which soon hardened into a sense of incongruity.

Nobles were looking at me with smoldering stares. Dozens of pairs of eyes caught mine, and each gaze was sharp like a well-forged sword. No matter how painful their gazes were, I trembled without being able to stop myself. Why did I feel so hot?

That proved to be the start. The nobles near-scrambled to the front of the dais and started saying hello. Their greetings were just a formality, as the nobles immediately introduced the women who came with them to the king. The women greeted me: sometimes boldly, sometimes elegantly, and at other times, shyly.

Their attitudes were different, but everyone looked at me in the same way, as if I was prey.

"Isn't this different from your promise?"

Just after one nobleman had finished his greetings and withdrew and before another came to stand under the dais, I protested to the king.

“You agreed.”

“But-”

“I am not forcing you to dance to the music while holding the hands of young women. What am I forcing you to do?”

It was difficult to refute the king’s words: he wasn’t forcing me to move; he was merely making others do so. I was left speechless. At the same time, I wanted to leave the banqueting hall right away, but I couldn’t because I was doing what I had promised to do. All I could do now was show my discomfort. As soon as I did, the nobles began to notice.

Naturally, the number of nobles who stood in front of the platform and introduced their daughters or nieces decreased.

“Aren’t you scaring the young girls? Soften your expression a little,” the king said gently as he saw my face.

“I’m just sitting still here,” I replied, and made my expression even worse.

The king burst into laughter. If he had been angry, I would’ve felt a little relieved, but the king just laughed as if I were a complaining child. I was kind of angry, so I gently created energy. The footsteps of the aristocrats who were trying to draw my attention slowed then stopped. Only then did I laugh with satisfaction.

I’ll do this from now on, I thought.

“Your Highness, how can you deal so with children who have not learned the sword?” the palace knight commander, who stood behind the king, chided me for my behavior with an embarrassed face, as if I was being childish. I tried to ignore him.

I just strengthened my energy and solidified the invisible wall that was created between the young women and me. The king shook his head, surprised as if both his hands and feet had been raised into the air. After seeing that face, I felt a little better.

Of course, I had no intention of lessening my energy.

“Sire.”

At that time, the Marquis of Bielefeld showed his face under the dais – with a woman next to him.

My raised energy had certainly made it impossible for the young women to stand before me, but the woman next to the marquis showed no reluctance to be in my presence, although she did have her head bowed. I frowned and wondered if I would scare her a little more.

Then I suddenly realized that the woman was familiar to me.

“Adelia?”

Adelia, so unlike her usual self, was dressed as a noble lady. She raised her head.

“Your Highness,” she greeted me with a blushing face, and when our gazes met, she closed her eyes. I was genuinely amazed by the unexpected appearance of Adelia. She wore a refreshing ivory dress that matched her light brown hair and wore no excessive makeup.

To me, who had always seen only her modest nature or her blood-covered appearance, Adelia’s elaborately decorated look was shocking. Did Adelia look this way?

I was surprised but quickly understood: Adelia’s face was not flashy but rather graceful and gentle. A perfectly balanced body carried that face after she had ascended to become a Master, and her skin was near-transparent, like a lake in midwinter, which added to her mysterious appeal. Until now, the rare beauty that existed in this realm was named Arwen, so Adelia had not received much attention. But in fact, Adelia’s beauty had always been there.

Especially among the men of Winter Castle, there were quite a few who had adored her. Her innocent and pretty appearance, which was hard to find among northern women, was what had attracted them.

Of course, their heartfelt desires could clearly go nowhere after they had seen her raging on the battlefield several times. In any case, when Adelia wasn’t mad, she was a woman who could be said to be adorable.

“It was hard work for her to dress up like this with a healing body,” the Marquis of Bielefeld said with a laugh while I stared blankly at Adelia. At that, I snapped awake and scolded the marquis.

“No. No, in the first place, why did you force a sick person to come?”

“She wasn’t forced-”

“Even if she wanted to come, you shouldn’t have allowed it. She’s a patient.”

I looked at the old man. I wanted to say more, but looking at his hurt face, I became frustrated and couldn’t.

“If you take a look at Adelia’s elegance, with her going to the trouble of dressing her healing body and coming here, you will come to know that there is something else you need to say,” the king intervened and chided me. I frowned.

“Then, what if she feels sick? Am I stupid?”

The king and the marquis sighed as I said this.

“He still has a long way to go, Sire.”

“Not only are you not interested, but you are also ignorant.”

Theirs was a conversation that I couldn’t understand, and I sighed, perplexed.

“Then, I have also given my greetings, so I’ll go back.”

The marquis looked down and stepped back from the dais. Adelia did so with him.

“Wait a while.” I stopped the marquis. “Leave Adelia.”

“What is that-”

“If she’s been dressed up like this, it’s unfair for her to be with an old marquis.”

Hearing my words, the marquis let a strange expression come to his face.

“Did you hear me or not? I don’t care if you heard me-” I smiled and grabbed Adelia’s

hand, taking her other hand from the marquis.

“Are you okay?” I asked her, “If you think it’s hard, say-”

“It’s okay, your Highness. I’m really fine.”

“I’m glad.”

As I laughed, I saw that Adelia couldn’t stop herself from laughing with me.

“Then, Adelia will protect me today.”

My words made many eyes stretch wide.

“Yes? What is that-?”

Ignoring the king’s words, I turned around. Countless nobles were looking at me, and the young women were looking at Adelia with narrowed eyes. They all saw me holding Adelia’s hand, which was a common action one would do with one’s flirt, one’s partner. Moreover, Adelia was a proud champion of the kingdom. If the invisible wall I created with my energy was nothing more than a low stall barrier, then Adelia was an impregnable wall.

She would be enough to protect me until the banquet was over.

“I believe in you, Adelia.”

Without knowing the meaning of my words, Adelia nodded, her face set on her new mission.

* * *

Thanks to Adelia, the first day was able to pass safely.

However, she was still an injured patient who shouldn’t be active, and for the time being, she needed medical care. I was not so selfish as to use Adelia as a shield on the second day.

So, I found a new shield.

“You want to be my partner for today’s banquet?”

Hestia Neumann Tudor, the princess of Teuton, awakened to my sudden offer.

“Why? What? I thought you rather disliked- Why me?”

“Because the envoys will not bother me if the princess of Teuton, a country which is quite the power in the west, is with me.”

“That’s definitely correct.”

Teuton’s princess narrowed her eyes and looked at me.

“So what do I get?”

“You had many wishes. You have already gained a lot.”

“That’s true- But this is… it’s…”

I wanted Hestia to do this, so I quickly laughed at her and helped her to decide.

“If you don’t like it, don’t do it.”

As I stood up straight away, she caught me in a hurry.

“I don’t like it,” the princess said, adding, “But scheming is not the exclusive province of men.”

Her accepting my offer was thanks only to our past.

* * *

In response to the king’s sudden declaration, the envoys hurriedly invited the princesses from their countries to the banqueting hall. However, after the princesses fully decorated themselves and came to the hall, the prince’s companion for the day had already been decided.

“Did you call me to play a bridesmaid now?”

Unsurprisingly, the proud princesses were angry like a raging fire, and thanks to

that, the envoys had to sweat as they tried to soothe the irate young women. It was unfair.

The envoys had their own grievances to contend with, but the princesses had grown up in precious, sheltered environments and so could not understand the envoys' circumstances. The young women only thought about what they could do to catch the Crown Prince's eyes from among all the numerous competitors.

If they came out too early, your chances would drop, but if they came out too late, someone else would already be at the prince's side. They had to give off a strong first impression but at the right time.

The first day had been a resounding failure, but they believed that their opportunity would surely come on the second day. However, on the second day, there was no opportunity at all.

"The legitimate blood descendant of his Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, who is the modest ruler of the Leonberg kingdom and more precious than anyone else! Eldest son of the Leonberg royal family! Savior of the North! The Northern Lion! The kingdom's strongest knight! His Highness Adrian Leonberger is entering! The most beautiful rose of the Tudor family! Princess Hestia Neumann Tudor is entering!"

This was because the princess of the Teuton Kingdom, who was said to be the most beautiful woman in the west, was occupying the seat next to the prince from the beginning. Indeed, the Tudor family's rose was beautiful. From the moment she appeared, the men in the banqueting hall couldn't even breathe properly.

If today's banquet had not been a place to choose a future queen, the men would have quarreled with one another and courted the princess of Teuton. No one would dare make advances toward the prince's guest today, however. And there was no woman who dared show off her appearance in the presence of Teuton's princess.

The envoys were forced to pledge that the next day would be better. Introducing a princess from their country now meant she would look shabby and desperate in comparison. They studied Princess Hestia and Prince Adrian.

The relationship between the prince and the princess, who chatted without even allowing other people to intervene, seemed to them like that of lovers exchanging pleasantries. The truth was that Teuton's princess constantly gossiped about the

other women, and the Crown Prince idly responded to her. In any case, the second day of the banquet passed in vain for the supplicants.

The envoys started to give gold coins to the royal palace attendants to be kept up to date on matters.

“I know his Highness the Crown Prince has no plans to accompany anyone today. I was also told that the Princess of Teuton would be absent from today’s banquet, though she will be present again tomorrow.”

After hearing the words of the attendants, the envoys were delighted. There was no predetermined mate, and there was no beauty that made others look shabby. The noble young women of Leonberg still lingered around the prince, but they weren’t that threatening as competitors.

The women in the north were pure white hydrangea, while the women from the west were bright red roses.

And the envoys firmly believed that the queen of flowers was a rose, so they did not doubt the outcome. They did not doubt that the beauties of Leonberg would not compare to the beauties of the west.

It was not long before the envoys realized just how shallow their faith was.

* * *

“Tchu,” I softly clucked my tongue as I look at the women standing behind the envoys, the women who were looking provocatively at me. Their appearances were just shells, and yet, they thought that this what was amazing about them, so it was what they campaigned with. The souls in those shells were so shabby that they did not even shine.

It was very uncomfortable to me, them showing off their modest appearances and thinking that would help them. Clearly not knowing how I felt on the inside, one of the envoys began to move. The delegation was showing off a woman with red hair as if she had clotted blood woven onto her head.

However, before they could even reach the dais, there was a sudden turmoil in the banqueting hall.

“Haa!”

“Hooh!”

The sound of heavy breathing came from various directions. As if everyone were obsessed with something, they all at once looked to the side of the hall. I turned my head as I followed their gazes. Then, when my eyes settled on a certain spot-

“Uh?”

My eyes instinctively widened. Someone who I had not thought of was there in a way I had never imagined.

CHAPTER 230
SOMETIMES IT HAS A SOFTER APPEAL THAN A SWORD (5)

The turmoil subsided. Even the musicians were captivated and stopped playing their instruments.

So, in the midst of that perfect silence, I saw a woman standing in the distance – with hair as black as ebony and a white face that contrasted with it perfectly. Her eyes shimmered like stars. She had perfect features without anything that needed to be added or subtracted. All were characteristics of a woman I knew.

Nevertheless, I wasn't sure if she was really the person I knew. No way that she, who had said she would rather kill herself than be a sword-wielding harlot, would appear before me so unexpectedly, so beautifully dressed – there was no way.

I saw her, I looked at her again, and I admitted it in the end.

The woman was the same woman I knew: Arwen Kirgayen. She was the knight I trusted the most.

I was dumbstruck, and without being able to stop myself, my gaze followed Arwen. Unlike the other young women, who showed off their necklines and delicate shoulders, Arwen was dressed in an old-fashioned manner, her dress completely covering her neck and shoulders.

Her ebony hair was finely combed and straightened, held no special accessories, and dizzied my eyes.

A light blush had been applied to her cheeks to add a sense of vitality, and those cheeks kept attracting attention. The look of her eyes, like the night sky, contrasted clearly with her pale face, and it felt as if my soul was traveling to distant realms.

More than any fortress, even my immovable mind was shaken. Previously, I had thought Elder High Elf Sigrun was the best in terms of simple appearance. I had

always thought that humans would always fall short of the faeries' natural beauty. It seemed like I had to revise that thought today.

Sigrun's distorted, twisted, hazy, and faded spirit couldn't even dare to match Arwen's. Arwen was, by far, more beautiful.

"Woo," I took a breath. Then I suddenly realized that my surroundings were too quiet.

I turned my head and looked around. The condition of the men looking at Arwen, forgetting even to exhale, was terrifying. It looked as if a nymph had bewitched them.

'Kwap' I clapped my hands hard. I summoned clear energy, and it spread through the banqueting hall.

"Ugh!"

"Hah…"

The men gasped for breath, and light came back to their hazy eyes. It was shameful; it was really shameful. I quietly clucked my tongue.

I was relieved that Arwen was not interested in decorating herself overmuch. If she had, there would surely not have been less trouble. I was glad for Arwen.

It was very fortunate to me that her soul remained impeccable, without any distortion. I was grateful for her honesty, insisting on her own path without thinking of looking anywhere else for guidance. I was relieved by this, and then the musicians came to their senses and started playing their instruments.

In response, Arwen began to approach the platform. Her treads were quite strong, however. Arwen's decorated appearance was one of grace, while her posture as she walked was that of a knight.

Where else in the world is there a person walking that way in a dress?

I stopped smiling. Her appearance, her outfit: it didn't match who Arwen was to me. Even though her clothes were elegant like that, her essence did not change.

'Shuck' Arwen came before the dais.

“Sire.”

Then she greeted the king, with extremely knightly, modest movements. I saw Siorin wringing his hands behind Arwen, and I pressed down and held back the laughter that was about to burst from me.

“Your Highness.”

Arwen turned to me. I smiled and looked at her. There were many things I wanted to ask.

Why do you appear in front of me like this?

Who the hell did you dress up for?

But I didn’t dare open my mouth and ask because I noticed Arwen’s agitation only after seeing her up close – her tensioned shoulders, her subtly unstable aura. It wasn’t simply that the stiff dress and fancy appearance she wore instead of crude iron armor was awkward and uncomfortable. Something was weird with Arwen. She had lost her composure, and I decided to calm her.

‘Shh’ I reached out and grabbed Arwen’s awkwardly trembling hand – just as she had once done to me when I had lost my composure in front of the emperor in the Imperial Palace. I believed that it would bring Arwen back to stability like her touch had calmed me then.

But it wasn’t so – the moment I grabbed her hand, Arwen flinched. I felt her body grew stiffer, felt her unstable energy shaking all over the place. Arwen had an awkward expression, and her eyes shook as if there was an earthquake. Rather than regaining her composure, Arwen seemed more agitated. She tilted her head with an unfamiliar expression, so I spoke softly to her.

“Stretch your shoulders. Aren’t you a proud champion?”

Arwen’s eyes had been shaking back and forth, finding nowhere to focus on; they now turned to me.

Two contradicting emotions passed through her eyes: disappointment and relief.

They were feelings that I could not understand. Before I could ask Arwen why she

felt like that, the emotions on her face disappeared as if they had been an illusion. At the same time, Arwen's turbulent energy began to stabilize rapidly. Facial muscles that had been awkwardly stiffened now gently relaxed and the crinkles that had lingered around her eyes disappeared.

Arwen looked at me with a soft face, and I felt a sense of acceptance flow from her. It was a scene that I seemed to have seen before, a situation that I had experienced.

After pondering for a while, I finally found the answer. I had seen that face when someone had fallen into a dream and later brushed off the illusion. Arwen's face was just like that.

"Your Highness is truly consistent," Arwen said with a soft smile.

Now, I felt like withdrawing my hand, but Arwen gently grasped it, held onto it.

"That's why I really like your Highness."

She was speaking in a warm voice that I had never heard before. My eyes widened, and my heart tickled for some reason. In some ways, it was a similar sensation to when Muhunshi is activated. And in a way, it was a sensation similar to when an Aura Blade is raised.

But it wasn't the same. This familiar yet unfamiliar sensation did not come from an artificial heart made of mana. I felt it from my true heart, made of flesh and blood.

It was weird indeed – mana can't flow there.

* * *

Immediately after entering the banqueting hall, Arwen began to regret it. She seemed to have gone crazy for a while. There must be something wrong with her head. Otherwise, there would have been no way that she would have appeared before the Crown Prince. This was all because of what her father had said.

'What does Your Highness think of Arwen?'

'Are you willing to welcome Arwen in marriage?'

Arwen had accidentally overheard the conversation between her father and the

prince.

At first, she was just angry with her father's carelessness, with him trying to destroy her relationship with the prince. That was all, but after her anger subsided, a small question arose in Arwen's mind: What would the Crown Prince's answer have been had she not interrupted the conversation?

Her heart brightened. Even if Arwen tried no to be, she became constantly worried about the prince's every move. She now had a private interest in him, different from before.

It was all because of her father. Arwen's head had become cloudy when her father followed her out and spoke of strange things. She had been very displeased that her relationship with the prince had become awkward because of her father's remarks.

The actions he took by giving meaning to something that did not exist were terrible. Arwen's head was so cloudy that the Crown Prince had scolded her the next day, telling her to wake up. Arwen then tried hard to order her mind and let go of such thoughts. Still, the wasteful feelings couldn't be shaken off, not until she had met Teuton's knights and their swords. Only then could she regain her composure.

It seemed to Arwen as if she had fallen into a dream for a while, so she devoted herself to training, wishing never again to lose control. The king then summoned her. He asked her to attend the banquet, not as a knight, but to represent the Kirgayen family.

'If I have to fight against the enemy, I will fight. Even if they are ten times more than me, a hundred times, I will not hesitate to draw my sword. But if your Majesty wants something from me as a woman, I can't dare follow such an order. This is something his Highness the Crown Prince promised to me as well, so please consider that.'

Because it was an unacceptable order, Arwen strongly opposed it.

But the king did not give up and temped her with a cause she couldn't deny.

'Have you ever heard my son praise the blue sky? Have you ever seen him be spirited away by the bright starlight? Or, have you ever see him sink himself into the reflection of soft moonlight?'

'All he knows is swords and war, your Majesty.'

‘That’s why I ask this. If my son is also a person, then how can he live by only looking ahead?’

The king’s words were precisely in line with Arwen’s concerns.

‘The way of the world is that if something is taut, it breaks. If something is hard, it breaks. And that’s exactly what I see in my son.

‘I want the child to look a little wider. My son needs to recover some sense of what life is. So I hope that he will be able to live a little happier.’

After contemplating it, Arwen said she would go along with the king’s wishes.

Her decision was purely out of concern for the prince’s future; she repeated this countless times to herself. And indeed, it was true.

She was worried about only one person, and all her thoughts returned to the ever-busy prince, who knew only of swords and wars, and whose only purpose in life was fierceness. It’s what Arwen did for the future, so what did it matter if she wore a dress rather than rags?

Arwen made up her mind and headed to the banqueting hall. Her loose hair and sky-blue dress were several times more awkward and uncomfortable than she had expected. And while suffering through that discomfort, Arwen stood in front of the Crown Prince. At that moment, she forgot about the suffocating makeup that covered her face, her cumbersome hair, the dress. Arwen felt strange.

Suddenly, when the prince held her hand, her heart started to beat faster, then pound.

“Stretch your shoulders. Aren’t you a proud champion?”

However, unlike Arwen, the Crown Prince was very peaceful. His gaze was full of trust, a clear gaze that didn’t show any confusion. Arwen was disappointed and relieved at the same time. She was sad, and regret filled her again.

Conflicting emotions raged in her heart until only one remained: a sense of purpose. Arwen’s mind, which had been cloudy, cleared only then.

“Your Highness is truly consistent.”

As he had promised from their first encounter, the Crown Prince still looked at Arwen with selfless eyes.

“That’s why I really like your Highness.”

Arwen was so glad that he was there. Her mood suddenly improved; it was a sudden change of emotions that she couldn’t even understand. She probably never would.

“Your Highness, I have a request.”

Arwen was feeling spontaneous.

“Would you like to dance with me?”

She requested something that she would never have asked for.

“I don’t know how to dance.” The prince frowned.

“I don’t know either.”

A questioning look arose on the prince’s face.

“But why-”

“I want to get rid of the delusions in my heart.”

The prince’s puzzlement grew deeper.

“Don’t you like the request?” Arwen returned to the matter at hand instead of answering the prince’s doubts.

“I don’t like it,” the prince replied with an embarrassed face. Arwen gave a small smile, then she suddenly reached out and grabbed the prince’s hand.

“Uh? Uh…” As the prince made spluttering noises, Arwen led him to the center of the banqueting hall, almost dragging him there. The musicians quickly started playing, and sweet music began flowing around them. The man and woman exchanged glances, and Arwen felt embarrassed by this.

She decided it was a good time to exhale. If there was a problem, it was the fact that

neither of them knew how to dance. If someone has to dance first, I'll do it, Arwen promised herself.

'Shh… '

At that time, a couple of men and women appeared in the middle of the banqueting hall as well. Then they started dancing as if they looked forward to doing so. They danced with languid motions, making it easy to follow.

Arwen looked at a pair of dancers, narrowed her eyes as she studied their movements, then opened her eyes wide.

Her gaze was nailed to the man's hand, which embraced the woman's waist.

"Aha. You do that," the prince suddenly said.

"Well, your Highness- Hold on-"

Without a moment's hesitation, the Crown Prince strode over and wrapped his hands around Arwen's waist as if to hug her. Their faces were so close that she could feel his breath. It was all so different from what Arwen had thought – all she had wanted to do was shake off her delusions with the dance invitation!

She wondered if this was the only way to be rid of such deluded thoughts. At least, if they didn't grow greater, it would be a good thing. And while Arwen was organizing her thoughts, her feet moved with a will of their own as they deftly followed the prince's steps.

"Relieve your tension. It's easier than you think," the Crown Prince told Arwen in a serious tone. Arwen didn't know what he was thinking inside. She sighed and decided to relax her breathing and go along with things. How could she have done this?

Arwen decided she would be faithful today. It wouldn't be too late for her once more to become Arwen Kirgayen, the knight, tomorrow. Everything does not always go as intended in the world, however.

'Dwak!'

The door of the banqueting hall shattered open with a sudden bang – and a bundle of

something flew in from beyond the smashed door.

‘Kudangtang!’ The lump rolled over the floor several times. “

Wagh!” Bernardo Eli jumped up and spat out blood.

“It’s bad!”

Before his urgent shouting was over- ‘Dang! Dang! Dang!’ there came the loud ringing of a bell. Its tolls were short and urgent, and it was rung to announce an enemy invasion.

CHAPTER 231
NO ONE IN THIS WORLD DOES NOT DREAM (1)

Arwen fell out of my arms and ripped the hem of her dress roughly.

'Pwap!'

I blocked off her front. In my hand was a short sword that I didn't know I had drawn. Carls and my knights ran up and surrounded me. I looked at them, then turned my head. Suddenly, the king and Maximilian were surrounded by a wall of knights. The old marshal and Siorin were desperate to calm the confused envoys and nobles.

The palace knights drew their swords and went to guard those who attended the banquet.

And Eli, with his hair tangled and his dress all messed up: "Damn. If only my body were stronger. At least I can get a stiff drink now."

Even with his messed-up look, Eli was having fun as he mouthed off. One moment later, the smell of alcohol stabbed into my nose.

"Eli!" I called out to him.

"Where the hell did that monster-"

"Eli!"

After I added energy to my shout, Eli, who had been spouting gibberish, turned to me.

"Form a description of the situation," I ordered him.

"While I was in the hall, my heart became bored, and I went for a walk in the garden. Then, I saw someone suspicious, pursued them, and was ambushed."

We were in the middle of the kingdom, in the royal palace where the monarch lives,

and at a time when foreign dignitaries were visiting. Security was several times tighter than usual.

But there was an unknown enemy? I didn't sense any signs.

"Three of them I saw with my own eyes. One of them directly attacked me."

Eli was a man who had risen to the level of Master. Even if he had faced three foes, it would be amazing if only one of them had managed to batter him into such a poor shape.

My expression distorted. "What kind of guy-"

At that moment, I heard the low sound of footsteps.

'Crrshh'

A sound of sharp metal scratching over a floor pierced into my ears. I turned my head, and someone appeared from beyond the door that had been completely smashed. The figure wore dark armor and dragged a bloody greatsword over the floor, as if on a grim rampage.

'Chik!'

He stopped right in front of the door to the banqueting hall, then glanced inside.

"Halt there!" the palace knights warned him as they raised fierce energy.

The black knight did not even budge in the face of the sharp energy emanated from over a hundred knights. I wanted to add my power to theirs, but then, I froze on the spot. I didn't see anything: no characteristics, age, name, none of it.

I checked it several times, but the results did not change. Even with my power of [Judging], I could not determine the knight's identity. The meaning was clear: the black knight's level was not below mine.

'Shh!'

The black knight started advancing again. Even if he wore heavy iron armor, I heard no footsteps as he moved.

‘Krsschhk!’

All I could hear was the sound of his greatsword scratching over the floor.

“Stop.”

Seeing such an impostor, I warned him. “That’s far enough.”

Uninvited guests weren’t welcome to take a single step into the hall.

“It’s him that attacked me. So be careful, your Highness,” Eli warned me in an uncharacteristically tense voice. Instead of answering Eli, I stared at the Black Knight. He also stopped and looked at me quietly. It was a very alien gaze, as if an empty suit of armor was staring at me. I couldn’t feel anything, so well was the guy hiding his energy. The Black Knight didn’t show any hint of being hostile, even after he had made Eli a ragged mess.

At first glance, his ghost-like presence resembled the dead, but he was by no means dead. I didn’t feel the spirit peculiar to the undead emanate from him at all. It was obvious that he was human.

Yet even I, a Sword Master who had reached heroic levels, could not detect his energy. I again tried using my power, and as expected, his identity could still not be determined.

As I gave strength to my eyes, I found a clue that might identify him: his black armor was scorched. Then his gaze suddenly settled on me, and I frowned. His blade was too blunt to be called a sword; it was a dull blade with a clunky form that was strangely familiar to me. After pondering for a while, I finally found the answer.

“Surely?”

I widened my eyes and looked at his sword. No way for it to be… That great sword was definitely something I knew well. Though not as old as me, it was still a relic with a fairly ancient origin. Depending on the age, this cursed sword was called either Red Lunar Eclipse or Gloomdark.

But the first name the sword ever had- “Verduisterung!”

It was the darkness that covered the moon.

‘Karree!’ The cursed moonsword cried as if it was very happy that I had uttered its name.

“Oh shit!” I gritted my teeth and grabbed onto the nape of Eli’s neck.

“Yah!”

Eli yelped at my sudden behavior, but regardless of his protestations, I looked at his body. His clothes were crumpled and dirty, but fortunately, there were no cut or stab marks.

“Well, your Highness? Why grab me all of a sudden?” Eli asked me.

“Is there a place where his sword cut you?” I demanded.

“There are no such wounds. Before we could even compete with swords, I was beaten- All of a sudden, caught by surprise. The coward rushed me from behind.”

Normally, I would have scolded Eli for his words that did not fit the situation, but now, I was just relieved. Truly, if the moonsword had hurt Eli, he wouldn’t be able to so deftly run his mouth.

“Why the hell did you do that?” he again asked.

“It’s a cursed sword that severs the soul from the flesh. It can affect you just by passing close by.”

Hearing my words, Eli tried hard to maintain his shrewd composure.

“Okay? The owner of that sword is still a coward.”

He looked at me, then shot a fierce glance at the black knight.

“You wanted to attend a banquet? By what right? Those who are not qualified cannot attend this banquet.”

The black knight’s shoulders shook as he heard my words. His face was not visible, but I could see that he was laughing at me.

“There is only one person who can discuss qualifications with me.”

The black knight spoke for the first time.

“And that is not you, Adrian Leonberger.”

His voice was dull and gritty as if stones were grinding within his throat. He spoke a hateful language that I thought would never be heard again in the center of the kingdom. It was the Burgundy Imperial Language.

“Why is an imperial knight here?”

“No way! They’re ignoring the recent treaty!”

The nobles had barely regained their composure and now wondered about the identity of the black knight. The envoys exchanged whispers with firm faces. Everyone was more than a little agitated.

“You are a knight of the emperor?”

I spread my energy as I stared at him, calming down those who were beginning to panic.

“Gloriously so,” said the black knight, not shaken at all by my challenging gaze. He merely scratched his magical sword over the floor, again and again.

“The only true ruler in this world, Lord of the Continent, Holy Emperor Ortega de Burgundy, is the name of the one I serve.”

At that moment, ominous waves spread all over the place.

‘Klingle klingle,’ the great chandelier started rattling.

‘Kliin!’ All the windows of the banqueting hall shattered at once. Glasses and plates placed on the tables shattered with loud noises, drink and food splattered in all directions.

“Ahhhh!”

Emissaries and nobles screamed.

“The sword of the imperial family,” the black night said softly amid all that noise.

“Head of the Nightmare Knights.”

The presence of the man, which had been faint, emerged like a tsunami and pressed into the banquet participants.

“Penta Knight, Morte de Morte.”

Panicked screams erupted from all over.

“Is this enough of a qualification for me to attend the banquet?”

The palace knight commander and his knights roared fiercely as they created energy, which soared from where they stood toward the ceiling- ‘Qaup’ it met the mighty energy of the Nightmare Knight and dissipated into nothingness.

‘Shuck!’

In the midst of the turmoil created by Morte, I took a step forward.

“Once, my introductions were long and tremendous,” I said as I met his gaze.

‘‘Isn’t it mine, either those high halls, or that dignified throne?’’

‘‘There is nothing that is not my seat.’’

I softly recited [Poetry of the Defeated King].

‘Go-oh-oh’

I, the king who had usurped the Warlord, was now standing up to the black knight.

The chandelier, which had been shaking as if it would fall right away, creaked as it returned to its position. The nobles and envoys who screamed quickly regained stability.

“The Emperor’s Dog: there are no words that better suits your introduction than this one title,” I said as I felt Morte’s malicious energy pushed to the edges of the banqueting hall. “The Emperor’s Dog is not permitted to attend this banquet.”

The black knight stood and looked at me, then spoke softly.

“I should have killed you back then.”

“When?”

“The reason you were able to finish your modest mercenary career safely was because his Imperial Majesty showed mercy.”

This time, I was surprised. I didn’t expect that the emperor knew of my past, of when I had concealed my identity to fight in the war for Dotrin. But my surprise was merely surprise, nothing more.

If there was one thing I did know- “You can try to now.”

I knew that Morte wouldn’t easily best me at present. Yet, for the first time in my life, I faced a Penta Knight, and his power was greater than I had expected.

That didn’t mean I would lose easily; if I had to fight, there was no reason to avoid it. No, in truth, I rather wanted to fight. A new vitality circulated through my body, a feeling that had been somewhat suppressed by my recent boring daily life.

A fierce fighting spirit arose in my heart. I really wanted to know: how great was the power of a penta-chain knight, a power I had never faced before? What kind of might was hiding within this guy who talked so leisurely during a battle of energies? Does he deserve to be the master of Verduisterung?

My skin was tingling, my heart pounded. Both my feet trembled as if they wanted to charge over the floor right away.

“Woo,” but I forcibly settled my boiling spirit. This was the middle of the royal palace, and there were those I had to protect behind me. It would be insane to fight with all my might here – at least for now.

When my spirit had barely been marshaled, the black night told me, “I have a great desire to do that, but unfortunately, I cannot. His Imperial Majesty has no intention of breaking a promise made by his own blood.”

“The guy who hid like a thief and made a bloody mess of a champion of the kingdom talks too much,” Eli said, who wasn’t even bleeding much. He was clearly not grasping the situation. His words passed my ears by.

“He must know,” said Morte, “if I had wanted to harm him, he would’ve become nothing but a lump of meat.”

Eli again swore, expounding upon the subject of the cowardly surprise attack, saying that the imperial had to be taught a lesson. Of course, the black knight did not respond, and neither did I.

“Let’s hear it then,” I asked the black knight, “What is the reason for the emperor, who said he would not break his son’s promise, for sending you here?”

“My business is with people other than you,” Morte responded, suddenly taking on the role of a messenger. His helmet rattled as he scanned the banqueting hall.

“It is with those who dare not worship the masters of the world.”

Morte’s gaze fixed on the exact spot where the envoys were gathered.

“The vain dreams your masters have will end in a nightmare.”

The envoys were terrified and looked very uncertain.

“And the nightmare has already begun.”

All the envoys gathered could speak the imperial language, and not one of them was stupid enough not to know what the words of the black knight meant.

“Are you going to declare war on the whole world before your own civil is over!” one of the envoys shouted loudly.

“There is no reason not to do so,” the black knight responded as if the matter was insignificant.

His gaze focused on more of the envoys.

“You have to earnestly hope that there will still be a place to go back to.”

Those envoys who met Morte’s eyes grew pale.

“But on the other hand, you won’t even get the chance to return,” the black knight rattled off again. “Hand them over. If you do so, then at least, as long as the treaty is

maintained, the Leonberg Kingdom will be able to face the same tomorrow as yesterday."

I laughed at him. "Before I do that, you will have to find a way to save your own life," I mocked the knight.

Despite my direct provocation, Morte was still confident.

"If you stand against me, at least half of those gathered here will die."

I had no guarantee of victory or defeat. If we collided here, as he said, many people would die. That was obvious; it was also something that wouldn't happen.

"You are so overconfident in yourself. That's your mistake."

He had to learn: the kingdom was no longer such a fragile state that Empire's agents could come and go any time they wanted. Also, the royal family wasn't forgiving enough to let the heart of the kingdom be violated twice.

'Kudangtang!' there came a sudden, harsh noise. Figures in burnished black iron armor rolled over the floor, making their entrance. Their armor looked a little less flashy, but the basic form of it almost mirrored that of the Nightmare Knight. Behind them, a middle-aged knight, also in black armor, appeared.

"The encirclement is complete, we have the hall tightly covered. This can't happen every time there's a banquet. I have nightmares when I hear that a feast is being held these days."

"Count Willowden!" the nobles shouted as they saw the Templar Commander.

The black knight stared at me quietly. His gaze seemed to ask what changed by the appearance of a quad-chain knight onto the scene. So, I opened my mouth and told him.

"There are many important folks who haven't arrived yet. For you, this banquet is just beginning."

Even at that moment, I sensed a powerful energy heading toward the hall at high speed. It was unlike the insidious uninvited guest's energy, who had so openly bared himself. It was the grand spirits of knights who had reached completion.

Needless to say, the first distinguished guests of the banquet were the kingdom's champions.

CHAPTER 232
NO ONE IN THIS WORLD DOES NOT DREAM (1)

Princess Hestia Tudor was humming a song. It was a rare thing to hear, even for the maid who had served her for a long time.

“Since your Highness has been to the banquet, you have been in a good mood,” the maid said carefully.

“So you noticed?” the princess asked and looked in the mirror. Then, she gently patted her upper lip. “You’re right. I feel good.”

She smiled brightly and took her eyes from the mirror again.

“Because my princess’s behavior has been more modest and withdrawn recently. Now that I see your Highness happy, I feel relieved.”

The maid had always known that royal people were good at hiding their feelings, but now she saw that the princess, who had always been rather withdrawn, seemed very happy.

“If I had known from the beginning that a banquet like this would come,” said Hestia, “I wouldn’t have gossiped so much in front of him, bearing my heart.”

“Do you care about him?” asked the maid.

“Of course. I have to.”

The maid couldn’t help but laugh as she heard the answer, and after her brief laugh, she smirked. She fought that spring had come into the heart of her mistress. She thought that the princess was also a bit anxious because she had a man in mind and hoped that that man had her in his heart. But it wasn’t so.

“I must care about the prince so that Teuton can act as an intermediary between the western kingdoms and Leonberg. In the meantime, everyone will believe that a stupid young princess has fallen for their prince.”

The princess's satisfaction did not spring from a young girl's innocent desires but rather from her realistic judgment of the situation as a cool politician.

"Looking at the situation, it is unlikely that the wrong person will become the Crown Princess of Leonberg. If it turns out like that, it won't be a big problem for us to return as soon as their schedule is over. Is it not like that?"

The maid laughed awkwardly without being able to regain the joyful smile she had worn moments ago.

Hestia Neumann Tudor did not care about the inner workings of the maid's heart.

She was only thinking about how to wield the sword the prince had placed in her hand. Even the mighty Duke Seymour had become a sword that Hestia could wield like an obedient dog. She was already looking forward to seeing how Teuton's men, who believed they are the best in the world, would struggle to resist her newfound power.

"When I go back, I have to start right away…"

Hestia's face relaxed, and she again began her continuous humming as her imagination dwelt upon such pleasantries.

'Druldruldrul!' The teacup on the table began trembling. The windowpane that looked down onto a well-tended garden also began shaking. Hestia's mood became sour. The presence of something great being roused from afar filled her head with white noise. Even breathing became difficult.

Had it not been for the break in the energy wave that followed, she would have run out of breath.

"Aah," Hestia gasped, catching her breath, and suddenly looked out the window.

She saw the brightly lit building, Leonberg's royal palace hall, where the Crown Prince's banquet was being held.

"What the hell?"

The presence which had pressed down on Hestia's soul had disappeared, but her fear remained unchanged, confusing her mind. She chewed her lips, afraid.

‘Pwap!’ Hestia slapped her own cheek, forcing herself to regain her breath.

“Ah? Princess?”

“I think something has happened outside. Go find out-”

‘Bang!’

Just as Hestia began ordering her maid to go and find out the circumstances, Duke Seymour barged into the room.

“My princess! Leonberg’s royal palace is under attack!”

Hestia frowned.

“A raid? Who the hell?”

“Now is not the time to think about that. You have to find a safe place right now and hide yourself.”

Hestia asked where she would escape to, seeing as she was in a foreign country with geography unfamiliar to her, but the duke repeatedly said that she had to hide herself away.

“It would be better to get out of this castle at once.”

“My uncle is with me, a man who is called the best knight in the west. There are also a hundred Rosethorn Knights. If we flee now, and the turmoil soon subsides, then today’s event will become a disgrace for us.”

Hestia tried to persuade the duke, asking why worry when the west’s greatest knights surrounded her? But then she saw his expression and stiffened where she was.

“Uncle?”

Duncan pretended to be calm, but he couldn’t hide the anxiety that fluttered in his eyes.

No, to be precise, it was more of a fear than anxiety. Recently, he had been defeated

terribly, but he was still the strongest knight in Teuton.

“Princess, your words are only true if Leonberg’s knights can deal with the situation.”

“That means-”

“Leonberg’s knights could never calm this uproar,” the duke stated and turned away from Hestia to look at the far-off banqueting hall — as if there was something terrible there that sickened him to the core.

“Is this because of the strange energy that surged from there a little while ago?”

The duke nodded, his face firm.

“It was only for an instant, but I’m sure I’ve never encountered such a great energy.”

“There is no possibility that it belongs to the Crown Prince?”

“The energy I felt is completely different from that of the mana heart of the prince. It was similar-” the duke’s voice became constricted, “It was a Penta Knight or a greater power.”

Hestia’s expression hardened as well.

She was ignorant of the ways of the sword, but she had heard how great Penta Knights were.

“The only thing that can deal with a Penta Knight is a Penta Knight. There is no Penta Knight in Leonberg.”

Hestia’s heart tightened, and she tried to fight her anxiety as she looked at the duke.

“I agree that the status of the prince is an amazing thing that doesn’t fit his age. But even so, I don’t think he can deal with a Penta knight,” the duke said, guessing Hestia’s thoughts.

“Maybe the Leonberger family will come to an end here today. It’s best to hurry up and save yourself before getting caught up in this and dying for nothing.”

Hestia’s face now hardened like a stone, and the duke suddenly grabbed her hand.

‘Chin!’

Knowing that he wanted to drag her away, Hestia shook off his hand and started to walk away with long strides. She was heading in the direction of the banqueting hall.

“What are you doing?”

“Duke Seymour,” Hestia paused and looked back at the Duke, “we are going to the hall.”

She said that with an unwavering gaze, even if her face was pale with fright.

“My princess!”

“I won’t force you. However, duke, you will be fully responsible for the outcome if you abandon me.”

“I will prevent you by force.”

The duke blocked off Hestia’s front.

“If you use your strength to stop me, duke, I will hate you and regard you as my enemy for the rest of my life.”

Even though what Hestia was doing was an idiotic thing, she knew she looked serious enough that the duke could not know whether she was sincere in her threat. Hestia had to do this. Everything she was planning was only possible while her agreement with the prince was in effect. If something happened to the prince’s person, everything would be in vain.

Hestia would rather risk her own life instead of giving up. Once the fire that had faded within her had come back to life, it was out of control. She could never go back to the past again.

Hestia decided that she would rather die than become a flower trapped in the garden again.

The duke no longer dared to stop her and took the lead. Rosethorn knights followed after them, and the sound of shouting began to be faintly heard. The fishy smell of blood penetrated Hestia’s nose.

“It’s not too late, even now.”

Hearing the duke’s words, Hestia’s pace, which had slowed, picked up again. They walked like that for a while until Hestia stopped.

‘Go-oh-oh-oh!’

A courageous spirit erupted and spread all throughout the palace.

“Those are Leonberg’s Quad Knights. They- They are heading to the banquet hall.”

“Ah!” Hestia exclaimed as she heard the duke’s words. It was a wonderful experience: powerful knights running as they revealed their existence without holding anything back.

Even without seeing them, Hestia felt that there was no hesitation in the steps that they took. Even without hearing a sound, she could feel that their roar was as courageous as a lion’s.

It was a roar that went well with their spirit; Hestia couldn’t help but think.

Her heart was beating rapidly, and at the same time, she grinned widely.

The duke, who had known as the number one in the west, already had a defeatist attitude before even reaching the hall. Meanwhile, knights whose names were unknown to her were running toward the enemy without fear.

It didn’t matter what country they belonged to; all that mattered was the fundamental difference in temperament. Hestia did not know whether Duke Seymour’s nature had always been so weak or whether it had become so after his terrible defeat. All that mattered was that Teuton’s knights were far weaker than she had expected. The energy became stronger the moment that Hestia entered a wide corridor leading to the banqueting hall.

“My princess, look away.”

As Hestia frowned at the sudden smell of blood piercing into her nose, Duke Seymour blocked off her front. Hestia did not close her eyes or hide behind the duke; instead, she kept them open and looked straight ahead. There were traces of fierce battle and many corpses.

Some knights were armored in black armor, while other corpses wore the brilliant golden armor of Leonberg's palace knights. Not one knight had not suffered a terrible death: some had hollow gaps torn into their breastplates, others had crushed helmets, and out of all the dead knights, not one had died without a sword in hand.

Hestia immediately understood how fiercely they had fought. Even while they had been seriously injured, they surely had fought their enemy until the end.

"Here is one who survived!" one of the Rosethorn knights who had gone ahead shouted.

Hestia saw a palace knight of Leonberg turn his head toward her. He was trying to get up.

Without a thought, Hestia stepped toward him.

'Chin!' The duke reached out his hand and stopped her. He shook his head and said, "He is already done with. There is no hope."

Hestia looked at the duke, then turned back to the palace knight. She bowed down and covered his wound with her hands. The gushing blood quickly stained Hestia's hands and dress.

"Well, the enemy's power was stronger than expected… I must go and let his Majesty know…" The palace knight repeated the same words over and over again.

"The paladins are headed to the banquet hall. So don't worry," Hestia reassured the knight.

"Oh, the champions have come! I'm glad they are…"

Only then did the palace knight stopped struggling as he gave a great sigh of relief. Then he smiled a little and died where he lay.

"Ah…" Hestia alternately looked at the red blood on her hands, and at the palace knight's corpse, then she arose. She looked behind her. The Rosethorn Knights were very tense, and Duke Seymour could not hide his anxiety this close to the banqueting hall.

Hestia mentally lamented as she saw this. Where was the west's greatest knight? Where were the continent's strongest knights? That these men were not even as brave as unknown knights from an isolated country…

'Cheolkeok, cheolkeok, cheolkeok!'

While Hestia groaned, she heard heavy footsteps from behind her. The tense Rosethorn Knights surrounded her. Shortly afterward, knights with blood all over their bodies turned the corner and appeared in the corridor. These knights looked at the corpses of the palace knights; their gazes nailed upon them.

"Damn. Even if we knew and were prepared, it was impossible to completely prevent the damage," one man lamented briefly and then looked at Hestia and the group. "Are you Teutons?"

"Yes, we are. And you are Leonberg's knights?"

Unlike the palace knights in their golden armor, these knights wore armor of a slightly dull coloration, yet their chests had the clearly-engraved symbol of a lion.

"Erhim Kiringer of the Templar Knights greets the Princess of Teuton. I honor the Tudor family."

The man who had such polite manners immediately explained the situation. He said that when the enemy invaded and headed for the palace, he was sent to protect Teuton's envoys. From now on, Erhim said, he would guide them to a safe place.

"Teuton is not blind enough to pretend to be unaware of a situation wherein our allies are in danger," Hestia stated firmly.

"Are you going to head to the banquet hall?"

"Yes. Duke Seymour and the Rosethorn Knights will help you overcome the difficulties there."

"Then we will take the lead," said Erhim. To Hestia, who knew how to sway the hearts of men, his answer was refreshing to the point of being novel.

"You don't disagree?" Hestia asked, curious.

“As you know, the kingdom’s champions went to the banqueting hall. If I have to choose the safest place in the palace right now, it will definitely be there.”

It was then that the silent Duke Seymour spoke up.

“Is it Sir Erhim? You don’t seem to know how powerful your enemies are. I bet the place you say is the safest is probably the most dangerous.”

Erhim Kiringer’s face remained expressionless as he watched the duke speak in a firm tone and with a stiff face.

“What would you have me do? Would you like to head to the banqueting hall? Would you like to turn around right now? Either way, we knights will serve you.”

His gaze was precisely directed at Hestia.

“I will go to the banquet hall.”

“Then I will serve you. Dunham, you’ll wait here for the palace knights. Follow them when the palace guards also arrive.”

Erhim looked sadly at the palace knights’ bodies for a moment, then stood facing Teuton’s knights.

“Follow me,” Erhim said and strode onward. Hestia immediately followed.

On the way there, they encountered the traces of battle several times, but there was no encounter with a living enemy. There were only fragments of black armor that had been crushed terribly — the traces of a too one-sided battle.

“It looks like one of the champions has passed this way,” Erhim Kiringer muttered and sped up.

After a while, they reached a corridor from which the banqueting hall was visible.

‘Chuck!’

Hestia and the Teutonic Knights, who had been walking along with the Templars, paused at once.

There was an old swordsman with stark white hair in front of them. With a sword that shone like the sun in his hands, his foot rested on the corpse of a black-armored knight. And across from him stood a black knight, his armor seeming to be covered in the pitch-black darkness of midnight.

He stood still like a ghost, and Hestia knew right away: this black knight was the entity that had made the best knight of the west lose his composure by only releasing energy, without them having faced each other.

Just then, the energy of the black knight began to rise slowly. Leonberg's knights raised their energy without losing a beat. The situation immediately became even tenser.

"A knight who prides himself on being the corrupter of dreams."

Someone's words broke into the middle of that tension.

"I'm not sure, but you expected you would have entered another person's dream tonight to give him a nightmare?"

The man who spoke was the prince of Leonberg.

"But there is no one in this world who does not dream," the crown prince said with a wide smile as he looked at the black knight. "It won't be surprising that after you wake up, you will realize that tonight's nightmare was no one else's but yours."

The prince spoke in a light tone, almost as if he was having fun. Then he said one more thing: that his sword was named the Twilight of Dawn, so it was the perfect instrument to wake someone up.

'Ssheeng!' Prince Adrian drew his sword and raised it up high — then slashed down.

CHAPTER 233
LEGEND'S SECOND COMING (1)

Hestia didn't even know that the prince had swung his sword. She just involuntarily closed her eyes because of the sudden flash, and immediately afterward, she heard a banging blast.

Hestia was deafened.

'Reeeee,' she heard an uncomfortable ringing in her ears. She felt dizzy, as if her sense of balance had disappeared. It felt like all the blood had been drained from her body as if she would fall over right away. Her initial determination to watch the Crown Prince's battle and to judge the possibilities and potentialities of the Leonberg kingdom in a cool manner had long since disappeared.

Hestia didn't dare to even open her eyes. Even with her eyes closed, the presence of the prince could clearly be felt. The power contained in the unrealistic phenomenon caused by the Crown Prince prickled her skin. She was utterly terrified, and there was nothing she could do other than stand there, her hard beating ever faster.

This wasn't the knightly fight she had first imagined. The fantasy of swords striking and beautiful flashes of light arcing through the air proved to be nothing but a fiction drummed up by her imagination. This fight was far more bloody than that and several times more terrible. To put it in words, Hestia would say it was close to the rampaging of fierce monsters.

It was a fight beyond the range of cognition, so much so that ordinary humans could not even look at it with their eyes open. The rushing wind struck her delicate body, and the shapeless spirit shook her fragile soul at random. Hestia couldn't even tell whether she was standing on the ground or in the air. Her consciousness became distant. Her body, which had endured up to this point, could do so no more and started to sag. Then, a hand grabbed onto her shoulder. At the same time, the monstrous presence that had shaken her body and soul faded away.

"Uncle?"

Hestia carefully opened her eyes.

“Ah…”

She had first thought that it was her uncle, but the person she encountered remained unknown to her. The beautiful woman looked like a person not of this world, with her roughly torn dress and longsword in one hand. She was looking at Hestia. Was there such a beautiful woman among the princesses? Why didn’t I see this woman yesterday, Hestia thought? Maybe this was the elf she had heard of.

Thoughts continued to flow, but Hestia’s mind wasn’t working that well.

“Who- Who…?”

After struggling to get a grip, the words Hestia muttered were messy and sounded ridiculous to her. Her pronunciation was murky, and her voice frustrated as if she was mumbling underwater. Fortunately, the unknown woman didn’t ridicule her even after hearing her stupid voice. She just spoke on with an anxious face.

“…!…?”

Hestia could not hear the woman over the ringing in her ears. She frowned. It was as if she was watching a pantomime; there was no sense of reality. The woman’s unrealistic appearance aggravated that feeling.

“…!” The woman frowned.

Hestia was fascinated by the beauty of even that frowning appearance.

“…!” the woman shouted something as she gripped Hestia’s shoulder harder.

‘Hwaak!’

Heat rose from the woman’s hand and flowed into Hestia’s shoulder, and the slight heat raged like a wildfire in an instant. Then, at some point, it had become unbearably hot. It seemed like Hestia’s body would burn out if she stayed there. Hestia became agitated and screamed.

“Ouch!”

Heat escaped through her open mouth. That pain that seemed as if it would immolate her whole body disappeared at once. At that moment, a sound came into a world that had been filled only by a ringing of the ears. At the same time, Hestia's sense of reality returned.

'Bang, bang!'

Loud sounds constantly began hitting her eardrums.

"Are you awake?!"

A particularly clear voice came through the deafening noise.

"The situation is urgent, so I had to be a bit hard-handed with you! Please understand!"

Hestia opened her eyes and looked at the woman.

She felt as if she was wandering through a nightmare as her distant consciousness returned to its original state, but the sense of reality she had lost in the midst of the confusion has now become fine. The woman's appearance was still surreal. Hestia stared at her blankly and then widened her eyes – she was Leonberg's Quad Knight who had defeated a Rosethorn Quad Knight.

She was the Crown Prince's knight who Hestia had unwittingly cheered for when she had seen her proud appearance as she faced rough men in the ring. Although unlike that time, she now wore a dress and light makeup, yet the great strength and dignity that Hestia had seen in her remained unchanged. Didn't they call her Arwen Kirgayen?

Hestia only then remembered her name and decided she would express her thanks right away.

"The fights between knights who have risen to this stage can sometimes hurt your brain just by looking at them, so please keep that in mind."

However, Arwen Kirgayen spoke before Hestia could even begin to express her gratitude.

"Well then." The Master glanced behind her and then turned without giving Hestia

the chance to speak.

“Ah…” Hestia sighed as she looked at Arwen’s back and suddenly turned her head. Duke Seymour was there. His face was as hard as it could be; it was a pale, tired face. Hestia’s expression, which had softened only moments ago, now hardened coldly.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demanded. “Here are so many of Teuton’s knights, shouldn’t we be helping our foreign allies?”

“Sorry.”

Hestia frowned at the duke’s soulless answer. The most powerful knight in the west and of Teuton was showing how weak he truly was. It was such a contrast with Arwen Kirgayen and her strong figure, and Hestia could not help but cluck her tongue.

“I will serve you.”

Only then did Duke Seymour guard her front. A bright glare flashed over the shoulder of the duke. Just seeing the light flashing over his shoulder for a moment made Hestia’s heart beat faster. She feared that her mind would become confused again, so she turned away, not looking at the light for a long time. She also tried to ignore the loud sounds that ceaselessly resounded through the hall.

Instead of seeing the battle between the prince and the black knight, she sought out Arwen Kirgayen with her eyes — with envy or admiration in her heart, and without knowing where else to look. Leonberg’s champion didn’t even know that Hestia was looking at her, as she was utterly focused on the battle of her master.

‘Thuk!’

A knight near Hestia suddenly stamped onto the ground — that was the beginning.

‘Thuk!’

Hestia turned as she heard more stomps. Knights who had introduced themselves as Templars were thumping their feet against the floor.

‘Thuk!’

This time, a heavy metal sound came from farther away. It was the palace knights who banged their large iron shields on the floor.

'Thuk! Thuk! Thuk!'

Knights of the Leonberg Kingdom had begun stamping their feet and bashing their shields down on all sides. It was an action that held no meaning for Hestia. All that she could tell was that, after they had started stomping, the air around them started to seep out energy.

The air in the banquet hall, which had already become torn in the catastrophic battle, now screamed wildly.

In addition, at the center of it all was the prince of the Leonberg Kingdom.

* * *

Shortly after the battle started, I found out on my own: the difference between four rings and five rings is not simply the addition of one ring.

"Urgh."

I realized this when I started vomiting blood. I glanced at my blood-soaked chest. Obviously, the wave from the rings would have been resolved when sword touched sword, but instead, when I snapped awake, the energy from the rings was invading my whole body.

And in the next moment-

"The light on your sword seems too weak to beat me back." I stepped back for a while, still thinking, and the black night spoke to me. "It's not too late now. If you hand them over to me, you will have the same tomorrow as yesterday."

The knight spoke as if he had already defeated me. Instead of answering, I wiped the blood from my mouth. I fixed my sword before me and stabilized my breath. "Woo."

My mana, which had then been disturbed by the wave of the rings, quickly returned to its original state. My Aura Blade, which had been shaking unstably, also began to shine brightly again. The black knight readied his greatsword and looked at me.

I took a few short breaths, at the same time charging across the floor. Then, I struck down like crazy. Morte blocked my assault using his greatsword.

'Klang! Klang!' Whenever the sounds came of our swords colliding, the light forming along the edge of Twilight was cut into chunks. Riding all along the edge of my sword, the energy waves of my foe's rings broke through without hesitation.

However, instead of retreating, I matched my blade against his blunt sword and turned my mana to dissolve his ring wave. His attack continued, then something snapped, and I again retched blood.

"I expected more from your heart. Now I'm just disappointed by your weakness."

The black knight sighed as he saw me like that. Regardless of his words, I settled my dizziness and readied my sword in an upward position.

"Because you don't know when to retire, it shows you to be a useless man. Because you don't know how to think, it shows your foolishness. You are just a little fiercer than the others."

Despite the blatant ridicule, I ran at Morte without worrying about it — and retched blood many times.

"I can't find a reason to continue this meaningless duel." The black knight suddenly swung his greatsword violently. I gripped Twilight with both hands and stopped the attack. The power contained in it was so dangerous that I could not stop myself from being pushed back.

'Qrrsck! Duk!'

Only by dragging my sword along the floor was I able to brake myself. I straightened my back and spat blood from my mouth.

"Stay back — before that modest heart of yours is broken to the point where it will never have mana again." The black knight glared at me, his greatsword hanging relaxed in his grip.

"This is my last mercy to you-" the black knight suddenly stopped talking. "Why are you laughing?" he asked.

I quietly touched my lips at his words. It was as the black knight said: I was laughing. My grin almost stretched to my ears; it felt as if my mouth would tear open.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s fun,” I said as I fixed my sword again. “I can barely stand the joy of knowing that there are conditions in the world that I haven’t been through yet.”

The mana released from my heart reached the tip of my sword after surging through my body.

“I am so joyful because it is fascinating to know that an enemy who has achieved such a level is right before my eyes.”

Mana clung to my blade- ‘Hwaak!’ and converted into an Aura Blade.

‘Woow!’ My Aura Blade became a blazing flame.

“Also, I can’t bear it because I am happy to think that such an enemy will soon fall in front of me.”

“Have you forgotten your own situation?” The black knight laughed mockingly at me. His helmet rattled as he did so. Let him try it then! Twilight was at the ready as I walked toward him. Morte lowered his posture and raised his energy. I just kept moving. When I was a certain distance from him, I then stopped.

“From here?” I asked myself and stretched out my hand. Foreign energy penetrated my fingertips.

“Obviously, the wave that invaded with the sword attack was resolved. But I didn’t understand how the flow of mana kept cutting out.”

Unless… it was a secret wave that cannot be felt unless you were aware of it.

“After knowing of it, it’s nothing.”

I clenched my fist.

‘Quap!’ I broke the energy that had invaded my hand.

“It’s quite understandable. Even after weaving five rings, all I had to do to counter them was to fall back ten steps, outside of the area of effect.”

“You’re talking as if you have discovered a great fact,” said the black knight, as if it was no big deal. He then asked if anything changed just because I had gained a new fact.

He was right — eventually, the fight had to be fought closer than ten steps within his territory. Because of this, I decided to enter that area.

‘Thuk!’ Someone timed the stomping of their boot with my footsteps.

‘Thuk!’ The sound of iron bashing against the floor followed.

‘Thuk! Thuk!’ At first, it was only one sound, but it quickly increased to dozens or hundreds.

It was the same sound I had heard when I was fighting the High Elf. My knights were telling me to move forward again. The sound of their stomping was the sound of them pushing back, and the sound of their metal shields became a sound that led me on.

I stepped forward, taking two steps. A mighty energy rose around the black knight like a wall, and extreme pressure began to weigh me down. An intense wave penetrated into my body of a magnitude beyond comparison to those before.

“The era of mana hearts is over,” the black knight declared – as if he found me pathetic.

Seeing him, I stepped forward again, three steps this time. Morte raised his energy even more fiercely, as if not allowing me further access. Right then- ‘Thuk’ the sound of an unusually heavy footstep hit my ears. I knew whose it was without having to look. It was a fierce energy similar to that of the Templars, and it belonged to York Willowden, their commander. It was obvious that he had come out.

That was the beginning – heavy, threatening, and sharp waves erupted from all over. The palace knight commander, the old knight who had faced the Warlord, and an unknown champion — each one of the kingdom’s champions was watching the situation and helping me by stomping their feet and bashing their fists against their iron armor.

Arwen stood together with them.

‘Woow!’ The resonating mana unleashed by the kingdom’s champions became overlaid on my heart. I felt a feeling of fullness that I had never felt before come over me. So ecstatic did it make me feel that I stopped and laughed.

My enemy had five rings that were pressing against my entire body, and the number of champions who supported me was five. The coincidence was too convenient for me to ignore.

‘Chin!’ I stepped forward without hesitation — and I finally got into the knight’s space.

The black knight looked down at me, and I looked up at him. We looked at each other for a long time before swinging our swords simultaneously.

CHAPTER 234
LEGEND'S SECOND COMING (2)

'Quaddeuk!'

The moonsword ripped over the floor and then flew up.

'Qawah!'

Twilight arced through the air. Two swords collided and fragments of Aura Blades scattered everywhere. The fragmenting pieces of light disturbed my eyes. Beyond them, Morte's creepy glance flashed through his helmet.

'Quaddeuk!'

His sword began to push Twilight back. If this had been like before, I would have been in a hurry to resolve the invading wave. At this point, I would've withdrawn my blade and waited for the next attack. Now, however-

"Hah," I took a short breath and then gave strength to both hands. The enormous energy from my mana heart ran toward both hands without any interference. I gathered that power at my fingertips – and put that energy on the blade. As Twilight pushed up, the moonsword began to tremble. I wasn't satisfied with this and pressed forward even harder. Then Twilight battered Verduisterung down, down, ever down, as if dawn was driving away the night.

My sword finally reached the black knight's shoulder.

'Kwagagak!'

His large pauldron screamed metallically as it was being severed from his armor. The black knight gave strength to his sword and pushed against Twilight. However, Twilight kept biting into his shoulder plates. It was only a matter of time before his shoulder was severed.

'Check!'

The resistance that had held my blade at bay suddenly disappeared.

'Waschak!' Twilight struck down in an instant. Having lost its target, my sword struck into the hard floor. With a roaring bang, pieces of stone splattered in all directions.

I raised my head as some of the fragments pounded into my body. The black knight looked at the sliced edge of his pauldron and turned his gaze to me.

"I was thinking of cutting it all off. Looks like my strike was shallow," I chatted away, as if sorry. Of course, it was not really regrettable. From the start, I never thought that I could easily inflict fatal injuries on Morte. Besides, I also didn't want him to fall under my blade so swiftly because there weren't many chances where I could fight a mighty Penta Knight.

The fight started in earnest, then.

"Hnngg," Morte stared at me and made a muddy sound as if he was a squid from the deepest depths. "Do not expect mercy from me anymore."

"Just ten steps."

"What?"

"We begin from here again."

The black knight looked at my feet then looked at me again. I remained silent. The spot where I was standing now was outside the area I had declared as Morte's region, and he only then noticed I had fallen back from him.

"I hope you can keep me away this time," I said and stepped forward. The moment I stepped into his territory, a tremendous wave began to crush me. But it couldn't stop me anymore. I took to the floor vigorously as I proceeded toward him. Then, I came to face his front and once more struck out with my sword. It bashed into his greatsword, driving away the darkness. I withdrew my sword, and again stabbed out, then slashed out.

'Klang, klang!'

Countless attacks came and went. The heavy shock of Morte's strikes seemed as if

they ceaselessly shook my intestines. But at the moment, the pain didn't matter at all. My blood boiled, my body was hot; it was as if an inferno was raging deep inside my body. The sensation brought me such joy that I laughed out loud.

'Klang, klang!'

I didn't relent in my strikes for a moment. Swinging my sword like crazy, I moved forward. The black knight struck out with his greatsword — a narrow strip from my robe's collar was cut off.

The black knight shook his greatsword in a dizzying stab — several strands of my hair scattered into the air before my eyes. Again, the black knight struck at me with his greatsword. My face was hot; it felt as if it was being ripped off.

'Klang, klang!'

The front of my robe had a cut in it, and my sleeves were torn. The trinkets that had dangled from my collar were ripped off. My palms were wet; it felt as if my hands were severed. I tasted the coppery flavor of blood in my mouth. This was all due to the moonsword's ability to damage its opponent's insides with the merest scratch. My body was full of signs of my foe's attacks, yet, Morte didn't look so different either.

His appearance as a man who wore a crooked and shattered suit of armor was a far cry from the grandeur he had sported when I first saw him. He was aware of this.

"Aahhhh!" Morte screamed, "Now I am mad!"

Getting him to scream was the basic pleasure; the venom in his words was the bonus. It was fun! I was pleased that this man, who had acted as if sitting in the highest place, acting like my master while he looked down upon the world, was now barking like a mad dog baring its teeth.

I was so glad, and the fact that I had been hitting him with all my might was raising my fighting spirit endlessly.

"More! More! More!" I shouted excitedly as I swung my sword out like crazy. We fought and fought again; I even became oblivious to the passage of time. Then, when I woke up, oddly enough, I was standing in the middle of the royal palace's garden, far away from the banqueting hall.

“Hawhaa!” the black knight cried out as he vigorously swung his sword and forced me to retreat a few steps. He looked terrible as if he was wearing scrap metal, and I could see how his shoulders sagged as he breathed, with his greatsword hanging in his grip before him.

Seeing him, I suddenly looked back. The garden was terribly ruined, and through its center, there was a bloody path. Pagodas were shattered, and the clear imprint of footsteps could be seen in the overturned earth. It was obvious who had created such a messy path that would never have existed in a beautiful garden.

“It looks like I will soon be hearing more nagging.”

Since the elaborately cultivated garden has been ravaged into a plowed field, it was inevitable that someone would come to resent me and hold me responsible for its restoration. I never liked it when people came to me, nagging, even less so if they wanted to make me spend the kingdom’s money.

Only then, while thinking about regrets that would come only later, did I feel gazes upon me. I raised my head. Most of the people from the banqueting hall, including the king and Maximilian, were looking at me from a distance. The emotions in their eyes were surprisingly familiar. Adelia, still calm, had the same eyes as I had when she battled. Her gaze, as if looking at a crazy guy, bothered me.

“Brother…”

Among them all, Maximilian’s gaze was particularly burdensome; he looked at me with a face full of his usual admiration. Pretending not to notice my onlookers, I turned my head and shouted, “How dare you desecrate the garden of the royal palace!”

“What bullshit-?”

“You must surely now get your master to pay for the damages incurred here!” I shouted as I fixed my sword. The black knight stepped back.

“How long do you intend to continue this meaningless fight?” He offered me a ceasefire.

I snorted. “Just because this fight might mean nothing to you, there’s no law saying I have to stop it.”

I was drunk with excitement for a while and had forgotten the essence of my plan, but I knew that this fight was not just entertainment for me.

“I wanted to know,” it meant far more than that to me, “how far humans can advance with mana rings.”

I was in the process of estimating the power of mankind before the war that will break out in the future — that is what this fight was to me.

“You were a lot stronger than I thought.” Obviously, the black knight was strong. “But you’re not that great compared to them.”

However, the problem was that he was not mighty enough to deal with the monsters that would soon appear in the world. Nevertheless, I was very pleased with the potential of mana rings.

I glanced around; there were the knights of Leonberg, their eyes now opened to new possibilities they had never known of. I was sure: they too would soon realize, realize what they had and what they could get. My enlightenment wasn’t deep enough to pass on to others yet, but it wouldn’t take too long to get there. And when that day comes, the Knights of the Ring will gain new power. I thought about it, and knew that everything I had tried was worth it. I was able to gain the answer to a question I had long asked myself.

“This is all thanks to you.”

If Morte hadn’t shown up to face me, I would have been left in the dark for a while longer. My gratitude to him was not false. But, unfortunately, I had no intention of sending him back just yet.

“Because we have already taken this one step, you have to help me a little more.”

Morte had more roles left to play.

“I will prove myself through you.”

I raised my sword.

“By breaking your five rings, the world will know that the era of mana hearts is not over yet.”

With that said, I unraveled my existence.

“Do you still have the ability the fight even after you have been cut like that by Red Lunar Eclipse!” The black knight was astonished as he faced my momentum. He expressed his disbelief that I could even have energy left to bare after being cut by his magic sword, which cut into its prey’s very soul. It seemed Morte had been biding his time, waiting for the curse of the moonsword to take effect. Even if I had been cut dozens of times and stabbed once, there was no way that even a single of those wounds would remain in my soul. I laughed at him.

“My first and last advice to you,” I warned him coldly, “is that you will have to do your best from now on. If you can’t stop me, you will die.”

If he wanted to live, he would have to use every grain of strength within him. The black knight could not disregard my words, and he raised the energy of his rings. Brilliant flashes gathered over his sword.

‘Grrrro,’ the moonsword began to cry gloomily. In the meantime, the light continued to gather upon it. I waited, standing still — so that Morte could draw out all his remaining energy so that Verduisterung could collect enough light. I waited and waited.

I stood like that for a while until his energy stopped expanding.

‘‘I cut the scales of the dragon that cannot be cut by any sword, and drink its hot blood.’’

I quietly recited the dance poem, channeling its power into Twilight.

At that moment- ‘Shhh!’ The world was split into two. Nothing stopped the piercing energy: Not the air, the solid earth, Morte’s intense Aura Blade, the notorious sword, or the black iron armor.

I cleaved through all of it, without a single exception. The black knight raised his hand and groped at his helmet.

‘Krshkk,’ a faint crack appeared in the helm. At first, the gap was as thin as a thread, then in opened little by little until the helmet was completely split in twain. Its two halves clattered to the ground, and white hair suddenly spilled out as the wrinkled face of an old man was revealed. The old knight looked at me opened his mouth.

“This is the Dragon Slayer that his Majesty said-”

A red line appeared over the old man’s face as his words turned into a sigh. Around that line, his face began to twist, contort — very slowly, little by little. Then Morte’s head split apart completely, and the left side of the old man’s body collapsed to the ground. The remaining half also toppled, and blood gushed from the bisected corpse one instant later. It was a miserable end, and there was no pride in it.

I brushed the blood from Twilight and turned around. Suddenly, dizziness overcame me. My body, which was hot, cooled in an instant. I had been intoxicated by excitement; the pain I had forgotten poured now into me. My legs loosened, my knees buckled, my body tilted. I couldn’t stop it, but I really didn’t want to hit the ground in so tacky a manner after cleaving clean through a Penta Knight. Contrary to my heart’s desire, the ground kept getting closer.

Then, suddenly, a hand supported me. I turned my head. Through my blurred vision, I saw ebony hair and a pure white face. I thought I knew who it was.

“Arwen.”

“Yes, Your Highness. It’s me.”

Her words sounded so sweet, and Arwen pressed her face to mine.

“It hurts so bad.”

She laughed, revealing her perfect teeth.

“You enjoyed our dance, so why don’t you bear with the pain?”

I laughed as I heard Arwen’s words.

“Ian.” Then the king’s voice came to my ears. “Is that the royal family’s dance you spoke of?”

I gave a small nod. The king’s sighs broke through my ears, but he didn’t sigh for long.

“What are the details of the attack?” I asked.

The king didn't answer. "Leave the rest to me and take a rest." Instead, in an anxious voice, he urged me to rest. Even if I didn't want to, it was a matter of fact: I had to.

"Good work, Ian."

The king's voice quickly started fading away.

"…of… nasty… hear me?"

Then it became completely inaudible.

CHAPTER 235
LEGEND'S SECOND COMING (3)

The wizards casted healing magic into the prince, their faces solemn, and only withdrew their hands once the bleeding had stopped. Arwen never took her eyes from the prince, then carefully hugged him. Her pure white dress quickly turned red with his blood, but she didn't care about this at all. She embraced the drooping Crown Prince, making sure not to disturb his wounds.

Carls Ulrich stepped forward to take the prince from her. Right then- 'Ftt' the prince, who they had thought completely fainted, opened his eyes. He started speaking, but the sound was weak and soft, so his words couldn't be heard well. It was only Carls and Arwen who heard the prince's words.

"Yes, your Highness, don't worry," Arwen answered gently, and the prince closed his eyes again, his face filled with relief. This time, he was utterly unconscious.

"What did my son say?" the king asked. A troubled look appeared on Arwen's face. The king didn't understand why she felt like that; only Carls understood, for he had also heard the prince's request. Carls knew Arwen's difficulties and even sympathized – because the prince's words had been so erratic.

"It's mine," he had said, "If anyone touches it, I'll never leave them alone."

At first, Carls had not understood what the Crown Prince had said. When he realized the prince spoke of the greatsword that had been wielded by the enemy knight, he almost burst into laughter.

In fact, it was nothing new; the prince had faced and defeated a great knight, but all he worried about was getting the sword. It was a rather childish thing to say. For Carls, who knew the Crown Prince's nature, his request was a very usual one. But that fact and the current situation were separate matters. Carls glanced around.

Numerous people were gathered here, including nobles and knights of the kingdom and envoys from other countries. They were still unable to break away from the spell of the glorious battle they had witnessed, and they looked at the prince as if they

looked at a great knight that would never exist again. It was a bit embarrassing to convey the Crown Prince's instructions in front of all these people.

This would be especially true of Arwen Kirgayen, who was famous for her discretion.

"Is it a secret that cannot be revealed here?" the king pressed.

"Not really…" said Carls while he searched for the right words. "His Highness the Prince has advised that the sword used by the enemy knight, a magic sword, could harm those who touch it without knowing how to handle the magic," Carls answered the king, making his words diplomatic on the prince's behalf. "So, if possible, avoid all contact with the sword until the prince awakens. But his Highness knows the sword cannot be left here, so he asked Sir Arwen to look after it."

It was what the Crown Prince had said, Carls thought. Even if he said it in a way more concerned about someone touching his stuff, Carls could not lie in front of the king, nor could he have remained silent. The king glanced at Carls, then thanked him.

"I will take the prince to his palace," said Carls as he approached Arwen and reached out his hand.

Arwen's expression slightly hardened as she alternately looked at the prince in her arms and the magic sword on the ground. In her heart, she knew that the prince had to be moved, but she struggled to release him, not wanting to lose the prince while having to take up the sinister sword.

"Lady Arwen."

Eventually, she sighed and handed the prince over. Carls carefully embraced the prince's body, then looked at the king and nodded. Carls started walking along as he held onto the prince.

The nobles and knights of the kingdom who had gathered around them retreated and gave way, and Carls walked down the middle of the path that they cleared.

'chuck'

Wherever he passed, people knelt silently.

Among them were Leonberg's knights and nobles and the foreign envoys who had

visited the kingdom to attend the banquet. There were even some of the kingdom's proud champions who knelt, and all of them paid homage in a consistent manner. They put their right fists onto their hearts and reverently bowed their heads. Carls stopped as he took in the scene. Here he carried a boy who had lived under gazes filled with contempt and ridicule. The eldest son of the royal family, who had grown upon without receiving the respect due to him. A prince who was abandoned even by his father and was driven to the northern part of Leonberg.

It made Carls feel overwhelmed to see that the Crown Prince was honored like this now.

He tried hard to hide his passion and forced himself to continue taking steps. He straightened his chest and raised his shoulders. Don't let the prince know that you are lax in your duties, he thought. Carls walked through the great crowd of people as he left for the prince's palace.

The same counted for the king, who watched silently and could not stand his rising emotions.

At the same time, though, the king's feelings were also different. While the reverence shown by the palace knight came from a sense of joy and respect, the king's emotions were caused by his guilt.

To see his son's body, so bloody after the fight- While Lionel Leonberger had been sitting on the throne and killing time, his son had been fighting a desperate battle. The king suddenly recalled a conversation he had with his eldest son a few years ago.

'So where are you right now? And where were you?'

Lionel had felt only anger when his son had said this because he had considered the words to be a ploy to dishonor his person. Why does this child insult me publicly, the king had thought? After all the long years of hardship I have faced?

Looking back on it, it had been a truly sloppy response. The king had regretted it again and again. There was no way to undo what was said in the past, however. It was a fact that everyone had known back then; only the king had been ignorant of it. So, Lionel decided to stop thinking about the past and all the regrets that he could not change. He did not intend to make the same mistake again. King Lionel saw the future, not the past.

He would make the kingdom rich again, whatever it took. And the throne upon which his son would sit will be all the more brilliant. That was the method of atonement the king had pledged he would employ, and this was just the beginning.

The king looked around, and saw the kingdom's nobles and knights, and shouted out loud.

"Behold! How fleeting is the promise of the unfaithful ones!"

The eyes of the nobles began to burn. Wrath arose like wildfire as everyone considered the ruthless imperial knights who had invaded the heart of the kingdom, ignoring previous negotiations. The king looked away and saw the members of the foreign delegations.

"Behold! This the price for having a greedy little boy that calls himself emperor as a neighbor!"

Anxiety mixed with hatred and emerged on the faces of the envoys.

"The Empire's knight has said that the nightmare has already begun!"

Instead of appeasing the envoys, the king fed their anxiety – regardless of whether the Nightmare Knight had spoken the truth when he had said the war had already begun. Perhaps even at this moment, the Imperial Army had started marching, aimed like a spear at so many countries.

The envoys murmured; their pale faces were filled with fear. Some of them shook their asses as if they would return to their home countries right away. The king watched them quietly. Then, when the fear and anxiety that spread among them reached its peak, he asked a question.

"Will you fight alone and perish! Or will we fight together and win?!"

It was a question that wouldn't have worked at other times. Prior to this, while they had still been predicting how successful a war against the Empire would be, the envoys would have sought a means to avoid that war.

But now was different; now, the imperial knight had so much as given a declaration of war. Now, the envoys had seen the inhuman power of the Penta Knight. What they've been through today was enough to drive them to the edge. Now came the

time for the cornered rat to bite the cat.

“We will fight together!”

“We can’t sit still and be beaten!”

The king inwardly smiled as he heard their shouts; now was the time.

“Our kingdom supports your choice and will be happy to be your ally if necessary!”

On the outside, King Lionel played the role of a trusted friend. Not everyone had lost their composure enough to get swept up by the king’s agitation, however. Some of the envoys had stepped back to observe the situation.

One of them now stepped forward and asked in fluent Leonbergian, “Would Leonberg have the power to do that?”

The simmering atmosphere sank as if cold water had been poured over it.

“If the war begins again, we are asking if Leonberg can afford to look elsewhere.”

In that silence, the envoys waited for the king to speak. Even faced with such a blatant question, the king’s expression remained unchanged.

“When we warred with the Empire, we defeated thirty-seven knight squadrons and destroyed forty-two. We burned down twenty-nine estates located in the southern and central regions of the Empire and slew their lords, burning their bodies. Eleven imperial legions were destroyed in the process.”

The king merely listed the past victories of Leonberg in a bleak tone.

“The kingdom won, the Empire was defeated, and-” the king turned his head, “in this place, today, Leonberg has won another victory.”

He gestured at the puddle of red blood and pieces of torn iron. In the middle of it all lay scattered the terrible pieces of the Penta Knight’s corpse. The king looked at the gored body without a word. It was a silent demonstration, and it was a silence that was more persuasive than a hundred words.

“Indeed. That is a good answer.” The envoy who had come forward bowed his head

and withdrew. After that, no one came forward to question the power of Leonberg.

“All remaining scheduled events will be canceled, so make sure to take care of your minds and bodies. Afterward, I will make a judgment once I pondered the current situation with a clear mind.”

The king declared that all official events were over. The envoys bowed their heads and said goodbye to the king, and he passed them by. Then he suddenly stopped to say something, as if just remembering.

“Dotrin and Teuton and some of the other kingdoms have already decided to share their forces. Please include that factor in your judgment.”

King Lionel made it clear that those who reached out their hands in alliance first would be treated differently than those who took advantage of the turmoil and only hopped onto the bandwagon at a later stage. At that, the envoys raised their heads.

However, the king did not spare them a second glance as he left.

* * *

“It took only two days,” said the Marquis of Bielefeld. “Just two days before the envoys started to ask for audiences with his Majesty as if competing for his attention.”

While lying on my bed, I questioned Bielefeld about the situation.

“Dotrin was our ally from the beginning, and Teuton also signed their treaty, so yes… but what other kingdoms joined us?”

“Most are countries that have already conducted close discussions with his Majesty prior to the banquet. Also, the delegation that was led by the envoy who asked his Majesty how powerful our kingdom was.”

Hearing that, I had to admire the monarch a little. It was completely unexpected that the king had prepared so many things while I was playing with my true body. In that moment, I felt duly rewarded for saving the king by using the precious Nectar.

“They will all probably say that they have reached consensus in advance and that his Majesty’s words only swayed them a little bit,” I mused. Maybe Bielefeld didn’t like

my manner of speech, as I saw he was about to begin his nagging again. So, I spoke first.

“It’s like that, or it’s not. And if you want to talk with me seriously, then put down that bottle of liquor. Isn’t it normal for such a classy nobleman to pour alcohol into a glass?”

I suddenly frowned upon realizing that all the precious liquor gifted to me by the princess of Teuton was flowing into the marquis’ belly.

“Is it important whether you drink from a glass or a bottle? The important thing is to savor the taste of the liquor.”

The marquis didn’t put down the bottle in his hand while he made his decent excuses with an embarrassed face. I wanted to take the bottle from him right away, but my body didn’t have enough strength in it. After giving a long groan, I finally buried myself back in my bed.

Seeing me like that, the marquis seemed a bit sorry and returned to the topic at hand.

“Rather, does your Highness know what people call you?”

“What do they call me?” I asked bluntly, and the marquis answered with a smile.

“Your Highness is called the Knight of the Dawn because of your image — wielding a blazing blue sword while cutting into the aura of a dying moon created by the Penta Knight. It was as if dawn was driving away the night.”

“What?”

The moment I heard the marquis speak, my heart beat faster, thumping in my breast.

“The Knight of the Dawn. Isn’t that a noble and grandiose name that appeared somewhere in the old heroic tales?” the marquis asked. Faced with my beating heart, I inadvertently frowned.

“You look embarrassed,” the marquis teased me as he saw me frown. I felt somehow… distant.

“This is your Highness’s own work. The first thing you said was about the light of the dawn that wakes people from nightmares. Your Highness…”

The marquis’ voice started to fade farther away until it stopped being heard — and silence surrounded me. Somewhere, I heard the sound of a howling wind. There was no wind in my room; the windows were closed. My eyesight became blurred. A fantastical landscape emerged from within that hazy view.

There was a man in the middle of a snowfield, a man kneeling on both knees, his head bowed as he drove his broken sword into the frozen ground. I was looking at him as if possessed.

‘Fsch!’

The man raised his head, then bowed it again. His face looked strangely fuzzy. Out of nowhere, he raised his broken sword.

‘Fuwchook,’ then he stabbed it into his chest without hesitation.

‘Dudududud!’ I felt pain as if my heart was being dug out of iron. I panicked as I grabbed my chest. At that very moment, the hazy face turned straight at me.

The man’s pale lips were stretched into a smile.

CHAPTER 236
LEGEND'S SECOND COMING (4)

When I woke up, the snow-covered field had disappeared into nothingness.

"Your Highness!"

Instead of the rushing wind, only the sound of the Marquis of Bielefeld calling out to me was heard. His voice felt so strangely surreal, so I stayed blank for a while.

"Your Highness! Your Highness! I've called someone, so wait a while!"

The marquis continued to scream without knowing that I was awake. His pale, tired face seemed to be a great deal worried. I slammed my hand over his mouth.

"I'm okay. But because of you, marquis, I'm not going to be okay."

The marquis stretched his eyes wide and looked at me.

"So stop shouting. Be quiet for a bit. My head is ringing."

Only after the marquis nodded did I remove my hand.

"Sorry. Your Highness suddenly grabbed your heart and groaned, so I was surprised and called…"

The marquis, now a moderate distance away from me, told me that he was relieved, but the concern still showed on his face.

"I suddenly felt a slight throbbing in my chest. It seems that the magic sword's curse did have a small effect on me after all."

"That's a big deal! The curse of such an ugly object has to be removed."

The marquis quickly started making a fuss again, so I answered him, saying it wasn't a big problem. In the first place, Gloomdark was not a weapon of high enough quality

to damage my soul. Well, as far as I knew, it wasn't.

The problem was that such an answer did not take into account the four hundred years I had been sleeping. I don't know, but Verduisterung must have consumed countless measures of blood during those four centuries. For a magic sword that didn't even reach to my toes in that age to affect me- I knew that the bloodshed hadn't changed its essential character, so even if the moonsword had cut into me dozens of times, in the end, it could only show me an illusion.

I recalled the vision that the moonsword had shown me, and a man kneeling in a snowfield with his head bowed came to my mind. No part of the iron armor upon his body was intact, and the cloak and clothing he wore had become tattered by blades. He had spent a long time in the snow; it was beginning to pile up on his shoulders and head. The bare skin exposed under his torn clothes and shattered armor was frozen blue.

The appearance of a body frozen in the cold of winter was exceptionally clear and memorable to me.

'Dudududud'

My heart became hurt merely by me searching my memories. The pain I had felt when the man had pushed the sword into his chest came into my mind.

"Your Highness…"

If it weren't for the voice of the Marquis, I would have stayed blank without getting out of the lingering vision.

"Oh? No… I had something to think about for a second."

"Are you really okay?"

"If I say I am, then I am."

Even though I've said I'm okay many times, the marquis didn't stop being stubborn after making me promise I'd allow someone else to look at my body.

"Keep in mind: Many are hoping that the Knight of Dawn will survive. The same is true of me."

After that, the marquis and his endless nagging left, and I was alone again. The scene of a snowfield came into my mind. The figure of the man who put his sword into his chest while moving his lips was clearly drawn. I moved my lips, recalling the shape of his mouth.

However, in the midst of a vision wherein everything was clear, only the man's face was strangely blurry, so it was not easy. I did not give up and repeatedly reproduced the shape of his mouth.

"Light at dawn. Darkness, sunlight, border…" I recited a list of fragmentary words whose meaning was unknown. After countless attempts, I was able to complete the first sentence.

"Morning comes through the darkness ripped from dawn's light-"

The moment I finished speaking the sentence, I suddenly had a terrible headache. The pain- It was as if someone was stirring the contents of my head with a flaming skewer. I stretched my mouth wide open. I couldn't even scream, and I struggled with the pain for a long time.

When the pain disappeared, it was only after my whole body was soaked in sweat. My flesh tingled as if an aftertaste of the pain, not yet gone, remained on my entire body. I felt bloated.

Nevertheless, I- "Look at this-" I laughed. It was because the entire situation was occurring so arbitrarily.

"It looks like it wasn't just an illusion."

At first, I thought it was the memory of one of the poor souls that Gloomdark had consumed. But I didn't believe that anymore. The timing was too precise and the pain too terrifying when I had spoken the words; it wasn't just a coincidence. It felt like…"A diversion."

Had someone unknown intentionally been distracting me? Just to be sure, I recalled the combination of words I had uttered a while ago. My headache started before I could even begin saying those words.

The pain blazed in my head, and in the mirror, I saw my eyes had turned white.

“Morning comes through the darkness ripped from dawn’s light.”

I struggled with the pain and did not stop combining words.

“Under the brilliant sunlight, the darkness turns ephemeral.”

My tongue twisted as if I was drunk. Everything was telling me: “Stop here. Stop at this point.”

Of course, I had no intention of doing that. The more severe the pain, the more complications occurred.

“Nowhere in night and day is there a place to stay.”

‘Jourleuk!’ Blood started to flow from my nose, its fishy scent filling my nostrils.

‘Biiii!’ I had become deafened, hearing only a sharp ringing in my ears. It felt as if the sky was falling and the earth rising; no distinction told me I was standing on a floor or floating in the air. Down, down I went, and with a ‘Plop!’ I started hearing sounds that seemed like audial hallucinations. A cold energy surrounded my whole body, and the chill came.

Moments ago, it had felt as if my head was burning; but now my body seemed to freeze.

And even at that moment, my body was sinking. I reached out my hand but couldn’t catch hold of anything. I kicked out with my feet; they touched nothing. All I could do was sink endlessly.

I looked down. The darkness was like an abyss that waited for me with its mouth wide open.

I looked up. It was as if I was peeking at the world from below the surface of a lake frozen in midwinter.

I saw my room. It was where I had been a little while ago, but it felt strangely far away.

Then all sense of touch disappeared; I didn’t even feel the chill. My senses of smell and taste were paralyzed. I couldn’t taste the fishy flavor and scent that filled my

mouth anymore.

The world around me had faded away. The karma I had achieved, the oath I had made — everything was scattered into the abyss, one by one as if being naught but illusions. In that reality of blurry and obscure things, I began to differentiate between real and fake. Then I came to a conclusion: I had a dream. It was all just a pleasant dream I had after sleeping for a long, long time.

I was relieved, and at the same time, felt that it had all been in vain. I laughed at the comfort of my hard metal shell, not a fickle human body. I lamented at the numbness I felt within my body of cold iron. I was confused. Was I a human or a sword? Was I happy or sad?

And at some point, even the confusion disappeared, and nothing was left to me. I existed in a world that had reverted entirely to nothingness.

‘‘Morning comes through the darkness ripped from dawn’s light.’’

‘‘Under the brilliant sunlight, the darkness turns ephemeral’’

I quietly whispered. The comfortable darkness that surrounded me suddenly changed. I had revealed myself, and the void now rushed at me.

‘Woow! Woow!’

Darkness and emptiness bit into my soul at random.

‘‘Nowhere in night and day is there a place to stay.’’

Instead of screaming, I continued to move my lips. Feeling the torment of my dying soul, I completed the last verse. And at that moment- ‘Krrak Krrak’ cracks broke apart the world around me.

And, with a ‘Krrwuf!’ it completely collapsed.

‘Hwaak,’ my sense of touch came alive. The texture of my sweaty clothes was uncomfortable. Taste and smell returned to me, and my face contorted as I tasted the blood in my mouth.

“Hffoo,” I forced my mouth open and breathed in fresh air. After inhaling and

exhaling many times, my somewhat faint sense of reality returned to its original state of clarity. As the sensations across my entire body became a complete whole, what I had felt moments ago came to life more clearly. I shuddered.

“I’d rather die than return to my sword again.”

It was only for an instant that I had felt the sense of having returned to my days as a sword. Nevertheless, I had felt eternal pain. Trapped in an iron coffin and forced to peek into the cloudy world was far more horrible than I remembered it to be. I clenched my fists, blew air over them, wriggled my body, took a deep breath — I enjoyed my senses as a human being for a while.

“I don’t know who constricted my soul like this, but it’s really bad.”

Only then did I get angry. If I could, I wanted to find the one who had tried to ban this knowledge from me; I wanted to return the painful favor in full. But unfortunately, it was very unlikely that he would be alive. The curse must be older than the first wielder of my true body that I could remember; it must have happened before the Great War.

I stood up in a hurry and grabbed a sword hanging in the corner of my room. The name engraved on the sword came into my eyes. The fact that the sword forged for me was called ‘Twilight of Dawn’, and the fact that the man had recited verses about the light at dawn… It was too coincidental. The figure of the man who had pushed the sword into his chest swam before my eyes. I didn’t feel the same pain that I had felt before. Yet, the timing had been too convenient.

“Is it a past life?”

I had believed I was a sword from the start, but that might not be true. It was an indescribable feeling. I once again recited the man’s song, the man who may have been my previous life.

‘‘Morning comes through the darkness ripped from dawn’s light… ’’

‘‘Under the brilliant sunlight, the darkness turns ephemeral… ’’

‘‘Nowhere in night and day is there a place to stay… ’’

‘‘For the light of dawn wanders across the border… ’’

I only then felt the loneliness and grief that had been hidden under the extreme pain, and the unintelligible final verse only then came into my mind. My heart was throbbing, and the area of my flesh where the man had inserted his sword was strangely painful.

I shook my head violently. It didn't matter who I was in the past; what really mattered was the present and the future — not the past. And right now, I had something to do. The greatsword that stood far from my bed in a corner came into my eyes. It was a stupid magic sword that could not even sever my soul; it couldn't so much as scratch it.

I took hold of the moonsword. Ominous energy permeated through my fingertips.

"You have drunk blood to a terrible degree."

The smell of blood flowed from the sword, and I frowned. It wasn't merely that the smell of the blood was so dark; no, for that matter, I had also spilled a lot of blood when I had lived as a sword. Nevertheless, it was very unpleasant, and for a single reason: most of the blood absorbed by the moonsword was not that of soldiers and knights on the battlefield.

"Children. Women. Old men."

The blood belonged only to the powerless.

"This is not even a sword."

Even the name of Verduisterung was a waste. It was just a bloody monster. On the opposite side of my room, there was a mounting that held my other half. I strode over and grabbed my body. It immediately trembled and released a cold energy. In an instant, the air froze.

"It's time to eat."

The air had been frigid; after I spoke, the coldness melted away. It was as if the frostiness that had spewed from the sword smoldered into nothingness.

'Woow,' it trembled — like a cute cat purring for its meal.

CHAPTER 237
A GROUP THAT FOLLOWS THE DAWN (1)

My eyes beheld the arrogance of my true body, which was unable to overcome its hunger, and I laughed at it. I found it all absurd. But the main question was much greater than that: “Who the hell are you?”

Now that I was outside it, I couldn’t even guess what it was.

‘Woow,’ my true body just kept complaining, making it clear it didn’t care about my doubts. Now that the cold was dissipating from it, it looked like a beggar who had starved for four days and was now drooling in front of a sumptuous dinner.

‘Farrre!’

Meanwhile, Verduisterung was trembling and crying.

‘Jii-r!’ It sounded so pathetic and sad as if it wanted to create compassion in the listener. Of course, in my opinion, it deserved nothing of the sort. It had lived its life sating itself on the blood of innocent people, and it was more than fair for it to be called a monster.

“Unfortunately, Gloomdark, your days of feeding are over.”

This time, I wanted it to believe that it was not the one who would feed, but rather the one who would be eaten. With a laugh, I hefted Dragon Slayer and brought it close to Verduisterung.

‘Ji-ee-ee-ing!’ The moonsword had begun to cry like crazy. I stopped my hand from moving and studied the greatsword. It was entirely thanks to the moonsword that I could access the memories beyond the mental block that existed in my mind. It felt like it was a waste for it to become a meal for my true body. If there were other such blocks and restrictions that existed within me, the moonsword could be helpful in resolving them. I gently put my body down and began to think seriously. My eyes glanced over my body of flesh. Where should I stab myself to finish the job neatly without any aftereffects?

Arms, legs, belly, and chest — I drew Verduisterung's blade back and forth over me. Its body was big, so it would need to be a big surface area, even if the stab wouldn't end up being that deep.

"Your Highness, a change of clothes-" Just then, a familiar voice came. I was standing with my back to the door, so I turned my head to see who it was who had spoken.

"Well your Highness… What are you doing…?"

The palace maid looked at me with a pale face. Only then did I realize what I was doing surely looked misleading.

"Ah- Don't misunderstand. This isn't self-harm or anything like that."

I turned around, letting the moonsword hang in my grip. The maid's face turned blue as she stared at my chest. I couldn't figure out why, so I followed her gaze and looked at my torso.

"Ah…"

My front was stained in blood that I had retched while reciting the poem to break the mental block with my strong determination.

"This wasn't a sword – I just vomited some blood-"

"Kaah ah ah!" the maid screamed before my words were over.

"Why are you screaming suddenly!" I heard someone demand.

"This is where his Highness is!"

It became noisy outside my door.

"Your Highness! What happened!"

Carls suddenly appeared.

"Well, his Highness-" The maid lifted her finger and pointed it at my reddened chest.

"Now, you were doing self-harm!" Carls widened his eyes as he alternated his gaze

between me and the moonsword.

“That evil magic sword! How dare it do this!”

Carls charged into me at full speed.

‘Kudangtang!’

Then other palace knights appeared and joined Carls.

“What are you doing! Let go! I’m fine!” I cried out, but no one listened to me.

“Shut up, evil magic sword!”

* * *

It took a long time for the turmoil to subside.

“I’m so sorry, Your Highness. I couldn’t help misunderstanding…”

The maid apologized to me several times, bowing her head.

“No. I don’t care, so go out.”

“I’m really sorry.”

The maid looked down and all but fled from my room.

“Why did your Highness not tell me right away?” Carls, who had taken a few steps back, asked me, almost as if he was coughing.

“I told you. How many times did I tell you? But nobody listened to me,” I responded, barely suppressing my anger, and Carls then told me of the urgency he had felt at the time, using it as an excuse. He had run into a hysteric maid, then saw me holding a magic sword in my hand, with my body being blood-drenched. At my feet, the royal sword was keening loudly and emitting frost, so Carls had no time to form other thoughts — he just acted.

“Because a precedent has been set, I had no choice but to think that your Highness was possessed by an evil sword.”

If Carls had referred to a precedent, it was surely when the third prince had been consumed by my body.

It wasn't a difficult excuse to understand, so I started to feel a bit sorry for Carls. As I watched him, with his eyes swollen blue, I wondered if I had been a little too hard-handed with him. But no, I wasn't sorry: as much as I had messed up Carls, I had also become a mess.

When the palace knights had pressed me down without reason, my clothes had become torn and my hair tangled. My energy was made unstable, and my fatigue had doubled after wrestling with the palace knights.

"Rather- Why is there blood?" demanded Carls.

"It's because I gained some enlightenment, but the price for it was a little high."

I couldn't tell Carls that I had seen memories of my previous life, so I looked around and then noticed that he was looking at me with shining eyes.

"How much stronger does your Highness want to become?"

"It's not that kind of enlightenment. Well, in a way, it is."

The maid who had left the room pale-faced returned.

"Your Highness, I brought a change of clothes."

"Thanks."

Seeing her so swiftly helping me, I sighed in relief.

"But I'm glad this fuss is over. If word of this event reached someone else's ear-"

I suddenly stopped talking and looked at Carls. His expression was somewhat awkward.

"Well, if something happens to your Highness, there is this new order from his Majesty to promptly give him a message, no matter how trivial-"

"So. You already sent someone to his Majesty?"

Carls nodded at me.

“Oh shit! Dress me up quickly!” I urged the maid. I wanted to take no chances; I had to avoid the king’s nagging by showing him everything was fine.

“His Majesty is here!”

But it was too late.

“What the hell is-” The king suddenly entered the room, saw my condition, and stiffened.

He usually came so leisurely to me. Why did he come so quickly today? I frowned and glared at Carls.

“What the hell is the meaning of this!” the king shouted. “I know you have an unusual desire for swords, but you are the Crown Prince of this kingdom, not a mere knight!”

“Sire, it’s not what it-”

“If you just look ahead and run, only going fast, you won’t get far. You have to take a moment to stop and look around at times. If you can’t stop by yourself, I’ll have to do it.”

I knew I was now set for a long nagging session with the king.

“Do not leave your palace until you are completely healed. Dedicate yourself to the cleansing of your body so that many who are troubled by your state may once again be at ease.”

It was a bonus for the king that there was no distinction between healing and confinement. The king had been scolding me like an unleashed storm; he now suddenly looked at me and said, “I’m glad there’s nothing wrong with you.”

His soft tone and expression were unfamiliar to me, so all I could do was stare at Carls.

“I would like to stay longer, but it will be difficult. I left the meetings with the envoys for a while to come here. Please take care of yourself.”

The king left. Carls, whom I wanted to curse all the time I listened to the king, also left the room.

“I’m glad it didn’t get confiscated.”

I decided to think positively. Now I knew that I had no motivation left to solve the blocks that might remain within me by using the moonsword. The Nightmare Knight, Morte de Morte, had already inflicted dozens of wounds upon me with the sword. Some of them had been near-fatal, having cut deep into flesh. If some other forbidden parts of me existed that Verduisterung could have unlocked, the blocks would have been resolved immediately.

“That’s it for you.”

I lifted Verduisterung and placed it upon my true body.

‘Kyaah ahhh!’ The moonsword screamed.

‘Quap!’ My true body produced a hazy frost that began creeping over Verduisterung’s larger body. The moonsword struggled by unleashing tendrils of dark crimson blood. However, there was an overwhelming difference between my body and Verduisterung that could not be overcome by the lesser sword. All resistance ended, and the moonsword soon froze completely.

My body’s meal began. It ate it very slowly — with a steady pace as if savoring the energy accumulated for hundreds of years.

“I’m eating well.”

Looking at it, I laughed happily. I even felt like I was raising a child. I don’t know if it was okay to call a bad-tempered guy who breathed frost and could turn the entire world into a frozen hell a boy. Still, my true body was like a child who ate sweet candy sparingly, over several hours. That is the terrible manner in which it ate Verduisterung. Later, he started to feast on his meal alive, releasing the coldness that had held it in bondage.

‘Jeeing!’ The moonsword, which had lived for hundreds of years, now groaned in pain. Then even such sounds were consumed by my true body. In time, when the meal was completely over, Verduisterung was in a state that was worth less than scrap metal. And even then, the iron that formed the blade broke away into ferrous

dust, leaving no shape of the sword it once was.

'Wooow,' my body cried contentedly. I glanced at it, then grabbed it. I slashed out then brought it to a halt. My body pretended as if nothing had happened. I was left speechless by the absurdity of its behavior and almost bashed it against the floor. I had filled its stomach, but it ignored me like this?

"If you are satisfied with your full belly, you should pay for the meal."

I decided to be patient and soothed him, and his reaction became felt on my fingertips. At first, it was a weak sensation, as if I was dipping my hand in a stream. But as time passed, the stream became a winding river, and soon a huge wave. Then, at one point, it reared up like a tsunami and swept through my whole body. My exhausted energy quickly rose. Yet it was not finished; the energy continued to fill every corner of my body, struggling to find enough space.

That tremendous feeling of fullness brought me excitement. My mind soared endlessly, and I felt the ecstasy of that elevation. My heart started pounding with the anticipation that I would be able to maintain this form in the near future. It was an illusion.

My spirit, which walked on the highest ground, plummeted. The vitality that had filled my whole body escaped and a feeling of loss poured into its place.

"Aah…" I couldn't help but sigh. My true body trembled, and I stared at it.

'Woow,' it cried in comfort as if laughing at me. It seemed to me that this was all I would get for feeding it a low-level magic sword. It seemed to me that it wanted the real thing, that it was trying to fill its stomach even more.

I just laughed because, again, I found it all absurd.

"Well, it's not that I have gained nothing."

I weighed the mana in my body. A great amount of it was constantly spinning around, so much that it was difficult to hold it all within the vessel of a human Master. My mana heart had reached the limit of its capacity and was constantly wriggling. It was a sign that my mana heart would expand again. The moment it stopped shaking, it would be bigger and stronger than before.

This was more than enough of a reward for the meal I had served. Moreover, I had to consider the significant fact that the sword, which had constantly rejected me, had now given me some of his strength for the first time. Whatever one's goal might be, the first time is hard; the second time is always easier than the first.

"Please feed me so that my stomach bursts soon."

If there were imperial knights and paladins, they would be quite a good meal for him. Only when I filled his stomach to satisfaction would he show me his face.

'Woow,' my body cried. It sounded as if he was telling me he really hoped the war would begin.

"Don't say that. You might hate waiting, but it won't be for long."

Even after hearing my words, my main body kept whining.

As if answering the guy's moans, a great energy arose from far away. It was a high-level martial spirit; it felt like an army that was about to charge. I shoved my head out of the window and pursued its source.

It came from the hall, where the king and the envoys should now be, upon which the kingdom's flag was fluttering.

CHAPTER 238
A GROUP THAT FOLLOWS THE DAWN (2)

I reflexively took up Twilight. “Who is this guy?”

Whilst gritting my teeth, I began running from the room but suddenly stopped. Something was different. The spirit that had been erected felt like an army before battle, but there was no murderous or hostile intent contained within it. To put it another way, it was an energy closer to determination. I looked at Twilight and gave it a few shakes, and I was able to capture a familiar presence in it. It was the presence of the king who had drunk Nectar.

“Ah.”

The king’s energy was elevated endlessly, just like when he had declared independence from the Empire.

“Is his Majesty busy doing something?”

Suddenly, the spire of the royal palace caught my eye. The royal flag fluttered upon it: a roaring lion rampant on a white field. Another flag was being hoisted beside it, and it suddenly caught the wind. It was the first time I saw such a flag in my life: the sun’s emblem on a dark blue field.

The contrast between the golden lion on the white field and the sun on the dark blue field was exceptionally clear. The air surrounding the royal palace suddenly changed while I looked at the dark blue flag fluttering along with Leonberg’s symbol. I was sure the meeting was over, and the energy in the air, which had been somewhat cluttered, rose sharply like a stabbing knife in an instant.

I heard faint shouts from afar.

‘…hurray!’

‘…Hoorah!’

At first, it was too far away, but the faint shouts began getting closer. Then they finally reached my palace.

“Long live the Leonberg Kingdom!”

“Long live the Dawn Alliance!”

I was stunned by that unfamiliar name.

“Dawn Alliance?”

Just then, my door burst open, and Carls appeared.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

Unlike usual, his face looked completely ecstatic.

“His Majesty has declared the formation of the Anti-Imperial League!” Carls announced in an intense tone. It was only after hearing that that I felt like I knew the meaning of the name being shouted throughout the palace.

“All the envoys from the seven kingdoms who visited Leonberg unanimously agreed about the creation of the league, and his Majesty invited everyone into the new union and named it the Dawn Alliance!”

My eyes turned to the spire again. The sun so stark on the dark blue field, fluttering in the wind-

“Your Highness sees the alliance flag.”

“Alliance flag?”

“It is the flag his Majesty has prepared in advance for the formation of the alliance. I heard that it embodies the dawn of a new day driving away the night.”

Admiration flowed from me. When did he prepare for the formation of a league, even creating a unique flag? The momentum I had seen in the king in recent years inspired only awe within me. I had also learned the name of the league through Carls: ‘Dawn Alliance.’

It was a name that touched my heart strangely — and the name of Twilight came to my mind, and the word ‘dawn’ in the verses recited by the man who was so exceptionally memorable in my mind.

My heart started to jump again.

I had been in this state ever since I heard the Marquis of Bielefeld mention the title ‘Knight of Dawn.’ It was as if my heart began to thump every time I heard the word dawn or something like it.

“Is it really a past life?”

At this point, it would be rather unusual were I to deny that the man in my fantastical vision was not my past self. When I thought about it all, a question arose in my mind.

In the days when poetry had flowed along with history when the world had not breathed the poison of oblivion yet, the word dawn did not exist in verse. Of course, there was the possibility that I was unable to transfer the tradition in my past life, despite doing my best. So, considering the lonely man I had seen in my memory, it was probable that I left my body without leaving a tradition.

Even if it wasn’t true, I might have gifted the tradition to a knight who was not so great.

But that couldn’t be the reason… It had been an age when dark clouds hovered over mankind. All humans dreamed of a morning when the night has passed, wherein bright day finally arrived. Twilight and dawn were words that matched the hopes of such humans quite well. Nonetheless, there wasn’t even a simple dance poem that ties dawn into its verses. That is weird.

“It seems as if only the words twilight and dawn were cut out from the many poems that exist in the world.”

While I was locked in my thoughts, arcing one eyebrow into a frown, a familiar voice chipped in.

“Your Highness, what did you say now?” It was Carls.

“Oh, nothing. Carls, can you tell me anything else about the formation of the Anti-

Imperial League?"

It was only then that I remembered that I was talking to Carls, so I returned to the subject at hand.

"Yes, Your Highness. His Majesty has given us word in advance about it."

"Only, I didn't know! Dawn Alliance — everyone knew except me."

Hearing my words, Carls said with an embarrassed face, "It was decided while your Highness was distracted-"

"It's been some time since I woke up. I mean it."

"Shortly after your Highness woke up, the Marquis of Bielefeld visited and stayed here for a long time, and then there was the scuffle after-" Carls' hand touched his eyelids, which were still bruised. "In addition, his Majesty himself gathered us palace knights and said strictly, 'If he hears the news from outside, he won't be able to sit still, he'll become anxious, as if horns were growing from his hips."

Carls said all the secrecy was under the king's strict command, and I was left speechless.

"In addition, if it became noisy outside and your Highness wanted to head out of the palace, his Majesty gave a command saying that we have to stop you, regardless of the methods."

I was shocked and acted all innocent, but Carls was already staring at me.

"Your Highness probably wants to go out of the palace."

I nonchalantly hid Twilight behind my back.

"Me? Not really, no."

"That is fortunate," said Carls. "His Majesty said that if you violate his order and go abroad, he will leave you on the rear lines in the future war against the Empire."

"I have no intention of going out. I must rest."

“I see. Okay.” Carls’ lips were subtly shaking; he wanted to grin.

“Yes, so you know. Get out. You’re interfering with me resting.”

For some reason, I no longer wanted to look at Carls, so I ordered him to go out right away.

“Then please rest comfortably.”

Just as Carls was about to leave the room, I stopped him and made a request.

“Carls, if you can find any books written by ancient knights, please…”

“As an example, what does your Highness mean?”

“Even if it’s not a history book but a biography about a hero, a novel, a book about knights — everything.”

“I’ll see what I can find.”

Carls looked down and left my room.

‘Dush’

The door closed, and I was alone again. I looked out the window. The flags fluttered atop the spire as if they would never come to a rest, and the shouts continued to grow in intensity. My stomach was burning; I wanted to leave my room right away. I wanted to go to the hall, where everyone was gathering, and I wanted to feel the kingdom’s martial determination up close.

‘As if horns were growing from his hips.’

What the king had said to Carls was exactly how I felt now.

“No.”

However, I quickly recalled the king’s threat of leaving me in the rear if I violated his request. I would haven’t listened to him in the past. But the king as he currently was, with his strangely improved energy — there was a strong possibility that he would carry out the threat he had made.

If I went out, I would be worried about what would happen, and while I stayed, my heart kept pounding. A day passed while I couldn't do this or that. And on that bright day, I welcomed a visitor to my palace.

"Why does the Knight of Dawn, who broke a Penta Knight, look so dead?"

A man was standing at my door, wearing dusty fur robes, and looking at me.

"Vincent!"

Vincent Balahard, my dear winter lord. I ran across the room and hugged Vincent with both my arms.

"I'm full of dust," Vincent said, but he didn't push me away. Rather, he returned my hug with strength. The dry scent peculiar to the northmen penetrated my nostrils — that nostalgic scent that reminded me of the wintry lands.

"How are all the other people doing?"

"It's been less than three months since your Highness took Montpellier from Winter Castle. It hasn't been so long. Not much has happened," Vincent said as he stretched his shoulders, stepping back and staring at me. "Your Highness has done far more work. I hear that you gained a lot of injuries while struggling against the Penta Knight, but you look healthier than before."

"I did a good job and was blessed to live through it." I glanced at my body, then turned to Vincent again. "But why are you in the capital? Who did you leave in command? Isn't this the period where you should be busy with winter preparations? Is it okay for the count to leave his fortress at a time like this?"

"I came to the capital on his Majesty's call. Command was left to Sir Quéon. Because the monsters in the mountains have near-dried up, it seems that we don't have to worry about winter preparation for a while. I left my fortress because I am able to leave it."

I laughed aloud at Vincent's refreshing answer. I had known for a long time now that the fate of the Balahards, which had been tied to the harsh realities of winter, has been liberated. Yet, seeing a Balahard come to the south at such a time made me feel different. Vincent spoke before I could.

“I will not go back to the north for the time being.”

Hearing this, I waited for an explanation.

“If the war breaks out again, I intend to lead the Balahard Rangers into it.”

Vincent’s casual words filled my head with an unknown antipathy. It was a feeling I couldn’t understand. Vincent had grown up in Winter Castle, the place in the kingdom where battles are the most frequent. He was certainly welcome, and Winter Castle’s elite troops marching with him would be of great aid to Leonberg. I knew this better than anyone else, but strangely, I didn’t like it.

Perhaps it was due to my desire for the Balahard family, who had escaped from their harsh fate, to live in abundance and prosperity from now on. Maybe it was because of anything unfortunate that might happen to the son of my deceased uncle. None of those were valid reasons to stop Vincent’s participation in the war.

“No.” Nevertheless, I opposed Vincent’s inclusion in the war. “Winter Castle’s defenses will not be strong enough without you.”

“It’s not such a big problem.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

Vincent frowned.

“To fight for the kingdom is my duty and right as a noble of Leonberg. No matter how much you want to, you have no right to stop me-”

“No way.”

“Your Highness, here stands Vincent Balahard. The current head of the Balahard family and commander of the Third Legion. A count of the kingdom. If his Majesty was here, he would not have been so blindly opposed-”

“You can’t do it.”

Vincent’s expression hardened as he heard my forceful words.

“Now, why the hell-”

“Oh, I just hate it!” I screamed, and Vincent looked at me in an absurd manner.

“So it’s not that I can’t, but rather that your Highness hates it?” Vincent asked with a cocky grin.

“Don’t play with words.”

“I’m not. The meaning of the one is not the same as the other. The former denies my right as a nobleman, while the latter…” Vincent stopped talking and started smirking.

“Why? What?”

“This is why I like your Highness.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your Highness,” Vincent suddenly said as he looked at me.

“What?”

“I won’t die.”

For some reason, it felt like I was stabbed in the middle of my stomach; I was left speechless.

“I am different from my father. I have no intention of accomplishing something extraordinary as a knight, and I have no intention of making a name for myself by living fiercely. If I have a hope, it is that Winter Castle will stand for a long time. I also hope I will live for a long time so that, when your Highness ascends to the throne, I will have contributed to it and so enjoy my power as the king’s cousin.”

Vincent’s face, which had been stiff, suddenly relaxed.

“I promise: unlike my father, I will not suddenly leave your Highness’s side.”

After seeing Vincent’s expression, I couldn’t force myself to be stern anymore.

“So don’t worry. Please allow me to participate in the war.”

Even so, I couldn’t get my mouth to move.

“Even if your Highness doesn’t allow it, I will be in the war. Wouldn’t it feel better if you agreed with it?”

“Huh. Do whatever you feel like,” I responded with a snort, and Vincent giggled and laughed.

“Then I will unpack my things and come back in the evening. It would be nice to have a meal together after such a long time.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Yes, yes. Then I’ll see you later,” Vincent said, ignoring my attitude, and then left.

“Woo.” Once I was alone, I regretted misbehaving so with him. It was the same as saying that Vincent’s participation in the war was unwelcome.

However, there would still be quite a bit of time left for the war to begin, so there was no need for me to become disheartened this early on. Meanwhile-

“I have to talk about his Majesty about the position of commander-in-chief.”

It was a more productive job for me to determine who would take on that key position. I already started to wonder about it. Vincent might be a good pick to be in charge of the supply train and the rear lines. Even if he didn’t have experience in that position, I figured he would show a rare genius. I spent a long time on my own, and all the time, I pondered on who would be the commander-in-chief.

I knew the king didn’t want me to participate in the war, even more than I didn’t want Vincent to join it. So first, I would have to bake and boil the king.

Then, a moment came that gave me another reason to be relieved.

* * *

In the evening, Vincent and a few other folks with happy faces visited my palace.

They were Jordan and other senior rangers and Winter Knights, with Gwain and his comrades being among them. I settled everyone in the garden of my palace and held a small banquet.

Neither they nor Vincent mentioned the war, nor did they bring up any troublesome matters. We just spent the time chatting and joking. On the next day and the next, our own little banquet continued in my palace. I spent the time forgetting about such annoyances, and a week passed by.

Another few days passed, and I finally regained my freedom.

I left the palace straight away and found the king. The moment I was about to ask the king about the Dawn Alliance, a palace knight came to his residence and declared, “The Kingdom of Dotrin has declared war on the Empire!”

He said that the war had already begun.

CHAPTER 239
A GROUP THAT FOLLOWS THE DAWN (3)

I truly believed it was time to take a breath. I thought that it was time for us to recover from the damage suffered in the last war, to face the staggering situation in the country.

So, for a while, I thought we would have a time of peace to do so. But out of nowhere, the declaration of war came.

“All areas of forest that were lost in the last war have been reclaimed, and the Dotrin Royal Army is advancing toward the mainland of the Empire.”

It was also a hot declaration of war, with immediate action. However, it seemed that I was the only one who did not anticipate the situation.

“What is the Empire’s response?” The king calmly asked the palace knight, showing no signs of surprise.

“Dotrin’s advance was so sudden that so far they haven’t been able to respond. According to our intelligence around the third princeps, their light cavalry has broken with the main force and is heading west. So, it seems that they want to block off the invasion, locking the gates so to say, until their reinforcements from the center can advance.”

The palace knight also looked in wonderment at the king’s appearance — as if the monarch knew everything.

“Surely…”

Seeing the king’s unwavering attitude, I was convinced: it was clear that he knew from the beginning that Dotrin would come out like this. Otherwise, there was no way he could be so calm.

I only then recalled a few facts that I had overlooked as of late.

Why didn't Dotrin send any envoys to the kingdom's victory banquet, and why did the kingdom's officials not question this? It all fell into place: the formation of the Dawn Alliance and Dotrin's blitzkrieg. Why didn't I know? Everyone but me was aware of it.

"If you hear other news, let me know right away."

"According to your Majesty's will!"

While I sighed, the palace knight, having finished his report, left. The king then turned to me.

"Your face shows you don't like something."

"I was just thinking whether I'm truly the Crown Prince of this country," I unwittingly replied in a blunt manner. I wasn't in a good mood because I had been excluded from such important knowledge.

The king laughed generously when he saw me. He then said that I had the personality of a thunderbolt, and when he heard the news of the war, he didn't tell me because he was afraid I would moonlight as a mercenary again.

"Your Majesty seems to know what kind of man I am."

Instead of answering, the king stared at me. I could only remain speechless. Actually, if I knew beforehand, I knew I would have taken action somehow, but I was still disappointed at having been left in the dark. I hid my personal feelings and changed the topic slightly.

"Dotrin's declaration of war may give an excuse for the Burgundy imperial family to stop their civil war."

"What was the fifth princeps' reason for rebelling?" the king asked me instead of answering.

"To drive out the emperor, who he sees as malicious and destructive," I answered immediately and only then realized what the king was getting at with his question. I shut my mouth.

"As long as the fifth princeps completely denies the authority of the present emperor,

they can never stop fighting until one side collapses. If the war is stopped, the emperor will lose authority, and the fifth princeps will lose the cause of his great rebellion."

Surely the king was right. Without the possibility of an end to the civil war, there was no better time to attack the Empire than now. It was very regrettable for me.

Unlike Dotrin, Leonberg hadn't prepared itself to war with the Empire for generations; we were now just in a hurry to survive. We had barely achieved independence and won the war, and the entire country was in disarray. It would take some time for the kingdom to finish preparing for another war. I knew it for a fact, but when I thought about the King of Dotrin giggling as he cut down imperial knights, I became very impatient.

"At the very least, before the next winter comes, our kingdom will also be ready. So don't be too anxious."

It was as if the king had looked into my very soul.

"It is a fight to overthrow a huge Empire that controls half of the continent. It will be a long war that will never end in just one year," the king said in a stern voice, knowing that my ass shook to get into the fight.

"It doesn't matter at all who started the war – what really matters is who will end it."

I sat down with an annoyingly irritated, unmoving ass. It was as the king said: this wasn't a war that would soon end. After asking the king a few more questions, I got up from my seat. My heart was upset, and I couldn't sit still for long after hearing the news of the war.

"Then, I'll go back to my palace," I said, about to open the door, but the king stopped me. He said something that might have been either a warning or a threat.

"Do your best to take care of your body. Do not let your body get punished again and again so that you become incapacitated. I will not give a single soldier or knight to someone who does not know how to take care of themselves."

"Don't worry."

I had told the king not to be concerned. What else could happen to me in the palace,

after we had already prevented the imperial attack?

* * *

When I went back to my palace, a guest had come to visit.

“You look much better than I thought,” Teuton’s princess said, looking me up and down.

“Does that disappoint you?”

“No way. If your Highness is in good health, I can at least dream at night,” she said, then laughed abashedly. It wasn’t the clearly pretentious laughter Hestia had shown when I had first met her, but very natural laughter with a moderate undertone of desire.

“You are leaving now?”

The princess nodded.

“I’m worried about my home country’s situation while I’m staying in this palace after I have achieved all of my original goals.”

“It’s a complicated situation in many ways, and unwise to stay away for a long time. Goodbye.”

Hestia frowned. “Is that all you’re saying?”

“With our great relationship, did you expect a tearful send-off?”

As I looked at her, her lips pouting, I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. Then I smiled and greeted her again.

“Goodbye. Go and do everything you desire.”

Only then did the princess’s face relax.

“Thank you. I really wanted to say this. I don’t think I will have the chance later.”

Hestia stared at me- then she stepped over and reached out her hand. I was blinded

by her outrageous behavior, only then realizing what she meant by holding out her hand. I shook her hand roughly, then tried to make Hestia let go of mine, but her little hand gripped my palm desperately.

'Guoak!'

I would've used all my strength, but compared to the toughest of knights, Hestia was fragile. When I looked at her questioningly, she said whilst glaring at me, "I'm sorry."

I thought the situation was unfair as hell to me; it was her outrageous action!

"What?"

"I can't hate you because I have received so much, but my pride is hurt, and it feels unfair."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but I heard the unpleasant tone in her voice. She had thanked me a while ago; why was she going so far now? I couldn't understand. As I pulled my hand back with force, her hand followed wickedly.

"Now what-" I began saying with a frown, but suddenly looked at her face and shut my mouth. The feeling that the princess's staring eyes invoked in me was really complicated. It was kind of awkward, so I gently released the strength in my hand, made it limp.

"Yeah," Hestia said as she gripped onto my now weak hand and shook it up and down.

"When we meet again, you won't be able to treat me as familiarly as you are now," I told her.

"Is there a day when we will ever meet again?" the princess almost screamed, as if she didn't like my attitude. "I'm fine anyway. You don't have to come and see me off because your body is healing."

After saying goodbye in a rather angry tone, she turned around. I looked at the princess as she walked to the door, then greeted her, smiling at her back.

"Goodbye, Hestia."

The princess stopped in the door frame, pausing there for a little while, then disappeared. For some reason, I was relieved that she hadn't looked back.

"Next time, I have to call her your Majesty the Queen," I muttered when she had left. I didn't know what had changed, but the trait of [Rose Queen], which hadn't bloomed when she had entered the room, had fully activated at the last minute. The Kingdom of Teuton would probably soon be ruled by a queen, and for some reason, I eagerly awaited that day.

"You haven't fixed your habits yet?"

Maybe I was incapable of abandoning the habits I had as a sword. I laughed at myself.

And so, two days passed. I was sitting on the roof of the spire as I watched the Teutonic delegation leave. The king and nobles were seeing off the princess, and she looked very confident. She looked like an envoy representing her country, regardless of whether she was a member of its royal family. The princess greeted the king and looked around. It looked as if she was searching for someone. Then, after a long time, she moved her small lips, and by their shape, I guessed that she was swearing, saying, "A ferocious boy, so he isn't even seeing me off?"

I decided to pretend I hadn't seen the curse flow from the noble princess's mouth. Amid the final greetings from the king and nobles, Teuton's delegation left the city gate. Duncan Seymour Tudor glanced at the spire for a moment, then swung around.

And so, starting with Teuton's mission, the envoys who had come to the kingdom began leaving one by one, at intervals spanning several days. All Leonberg's nobles gathered in the capital remained, however — as if waiting for something.

In the meantime, Dotrin and the Empire continued to fight. News came out every few days.

The Wyvern Knights had destroyed a fortress, and reports came that the Dotrin Army occupied a stronghold.

They were enjoying a winning streak, and while their victories continued, I learned a surprising fact: Dotrin had mobilized at least forty legions for the war.

I knew that they had prepared for war for generations, and I had also guessed that

the forces Dotrin had mobilized in their defense had not been everything. I had to admire them a little.

I knew that they would have put all their forces in the field, but I didn't know that they could muster so many troops. The Dotrin Royal Army was advancing in a hurry. It was only a matter of time before the Empire's eastern territory fell into Dotrin's hands.

"No matter how confused by the civil war they are, this is a little too much."

No matter that their command system had collapsed in the center after the rebellion of half the troops there, it was still unconvincing that the Empire could be so helpless.

So, I began to doubt whether the Imperial Army was really fighting a losing battle. I devised 3333 schemes that they might be deploying, but no answer came to me. While I was fruitlessly pondering it, I suddenly remembered an important factor that I had forgotten and started to worry.

"Oops! Malcoy!"

The last member of Marseille's fallen royal family, a person who was captured by Leonberg and converted to its cause after serving as a commander for the Empire — I had forgotten the existence of Malcoy de Marseille, a guru of tactics and strategy!

"I thought that when peace arrived, your Highness forgot about me."

Malcoy, whose existence I had only lately recalled, treated me with a very irreverent attitude — just like when he had first been captured. Even were I to have had ten mouths, I could say nothing to Malcoy, having forgotten him after promising I would allow him to show off his abilities without discrimination.

"Oh, no way— Your Highness did really forget I existed?" Malcoy asked with a flushed face as he stared at me. I couldn't fake it, so I kept my mouth shut. Malcoy looked at me with a dumbfounded look. I merely averted my eyes from his gaze.

CHAPTER 240
A GROUP THAT FOLLOWS THE DAWN (4)

“Saah,” Malcoy exhaled. His sigh had become a needle that pierced straight through my chest. An uncomfortable silence then followed.

After a while, Malcoy opened his mouth. “Your Highness. I have been waiting for the day when you would call me to teach me the ways and customs of this place. Day and night, I have-”

“As you may have already heard, a war between the Dotrin Kingdom and the Empire has broken out.”

I didn’t intend to be idle while words of resentment flowed from his mouth.

“Dotrin has already claimed the areas of forest they had lost in the war, and they are currently on the verge of completely breaking into imperial territory.”

“What are you saying-”

“The third and fifth principes, or at least the eastern region of the Empire, aren’t even concerned. They’re only focused on occupying the throne, so Dotrin’s invasion can be seen as a natural result.”

In the middle of my speech, Malcoy opened his mouth, but I ignored him and communicated the situation as quickly as possible.

“But I can’t understand how this can be. Even though the situation has reached this point, how can the Empire not yet have developed a countermeasure? Isn’t it normal to at least gather their forces together to prepare for a decisive battle with the Dotrin Kingdom? Even if they marshal only their Eastern Army, it will be enough to decimate the Dotrin Royal Army.”

Malcoy, whose mouth was forming into a sneer, began relaxing.

“By the way, the Imperial Army doesn’t even show signs of moving – they’re not even

gathering in one place."

Interest began to flare up in Malcoy's eyes that were still full of betrayal and resentment.

"It's like they're waiting for something."

"Your Highness has suspicions." Malcoy, who had been listening to my explanation for a while, spoke for the first time, finally taking the bait I had thrown him.

"Do you think the defeats the Imperial Army suffered were intentional?"

I replied seriously as I inwardly smiled with satisfaction, making sure I kept my voice low.

"Even the sharpest spears will eventually become dull if they repeatedly stab iron armor and shields, and armies that have penetrated deep into imperial territory have always suffered a bad fate."

Malcoy then nodded at me.

"It is exactly as your Highness says. When the enemy's momentum is high, the local armies of the Empire fall back, their prime directive being to draw the foe in and blunt their efficacy rather than openly fighting against them. The breaking of the enemy's swords and spears-"

"Is the job of the central army directly under the imperial family."

Malcoy nodded his head. "Your Highness knows the Imperial Army strangely well."

I didn't just know it well; I had experienced it to the point of boredom. Four hundred years ago, when the founder of this country marched toward the imperial capital with the Blood Lions, I was also there. And when they broke through the imperial encirclement and returned to Leonberg, I was with them. But I couldn't tell Malcoy about that.

"It's because the history of the kingdom is strewn with wars against the Empire."

I briefly explained why I knew the strategies of the Imperial Army. Then I returned to the original topic and sought Malcoy's opinion on the lukewarm response of the

Empire.

With their most powerful army bound by the civil war, it was difficult to understand how the Imperial Army remained silent as if waiting for something.

“Can you find out more about the war situation?” Malcoy, who had been thinking for a while, asked me for more details.

“I don’t know.”

I replied that I had no details to share. Malcoy’s expression hardened.

“It might feel strange to share secrets with one who had surrendered to the enemy and pledged himself to the Kingdom of Leonberg. But my oath to serve the kingdom was never a lie.”

“No. No, I really don’t know.”

I wasn’t lying. The king had told me about the war but had given no me detailed information.

Where they marched, what the force compositions were, how the war was going, and what kind of battles had taken place — he hadn’t told me anything. Even my entrance into the marshal’s office where all the information of the kingdom was gathered was prohibited. I could always ignore the royal order and sneak into the office, but I would be punished for it further in the future. I told Malcoy this.

In such a situation, the only thing I could do was waylay the messengers that moved to and from the enemy lines and so pluck up pieces of information.

“I know that your Highness is the successor to this country’s throne.”

“I know so too.”

Malcoy looked at me as if I was being absurd. He looked at me as if asking what the hell I had done that I couldn’t even be privy to my country’s secrets.

“I didn’t do much,” I muttered.

I just left a letter that was like a suicide note and had to be brought back bloody on a

wyvern. Then I was sent on a diplomatic mission and went missing after fighting enemy knights, not returning for a long time. And as a mercenary, I also battled a bit too fiercely in another country's war.

It was just a few small accidents. To me, they were trivial and minor incidents, and they were over. The king's current treatment, gently pressing me down due to my past actions, was really unpleasant. But what could I do? It was all done in the king's name. He said that the security of the Crown Prince who will inherit the throne was much more important than the immediate war.

"Your Highness. Even if you want to analyze the trends of the Imperial Army, you still need to be informed. Only unreliable speculations can be made without a stream of current intel. No judgment can be made without information."

"I said I didn't know. I didn't say there was no information."

"I mean, how the hell can you get that information then?" Malcoy asked, striking his chest in frustration.

"The marshal," I replied, having taken it for granted that Malcoy knew this.

"Did you not say that you are unable to enter the marshal's offices, by the king's order?"

"I am unable. Yet, you are not."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll get the marshal to allow you inside."

Only then did Malcoy really frown, realizing my reason for visiting him.

"So now I'm serving as your Highness's spy?"

I was insulted by the word, I, who had endured all kinds of hardship to thin out the nobles of the kingdom and the capital for sharing our secrets with the Empire.

Malcoy saw my reaction and quickly bowed and apologized.

"I apologize, your Highness. I made a mistake."

“I’ll let it pass this time, taking into account your ignorance of the kingdom’s circumstances.”

After his swift apology, my face relaxed, and I told Malcoy what I wanted him to do.

“Check the information gathered in the intel office with your own eyes and report it to me. Based on that, we can go head-to-head together and dig into the Empire’s strategy.”

“How is that different from being a spy?” Malcoy asked with a troubled face.

I shook my head and answered firmly.

“This isn’t spying – it’s just about preparing for a situation that might come into play.”

Malcoy was still unconvinced by my words.

“It’s different, anyway,” I reassured him. It wasn’t; he would be spying for me.

“Tell the marshal I’m waiting for him,” I told a messenger and sent him off to the Marquis of Bielefeld. And soon enough, the marquis came to my palace.

“It’s a waste to let such talent lay dormant. If you put him by your side and teach him well, he will become an asset that will be of great use to you.”

The old noble looked at Malcoy and me alternately.

“Huhu, hahuhu.”

He then suddenly laughed.

“If that’s all your Highness has to say, I’ll go back now. There are so many things to be done.”

The marquis suddenly looked down and turned around to leave. I decided I had to give him some incentive.

“I have recognized the talent of a maid that no one knew was talented. Have you forgotten that I made her my knight and raised her to become a champion of the kingdom? It seems that you don’t believe my eye for talent, marquis.”

“Is that a thing to say? I believe in your Highness more than anyone. It’s just this current request that I don’t fully believe in.” Bielefeld looked at me and sighed as if the ground has been ripped out from under him. “It’s a question that plagues my mind: Why only now? Why put him in service of the marshal?”

“It’s because his talent is exactly what is required of the marshal’s staff.”

“Do you really have no other motive?”

I laughed awkwardly as the marquis watched me. It felt as if he knew what I was doing. Even as I thought about it, my scheme was one that could be seen clearly. But at times like these, you have to be brazen.

“The sooner he starts, the sooner his talent will blossom and be of decisive benefit for the kingdom’s future. I believe you understand what this means, marquis.”

Instead of answering, Bielefeld merely sighed.

“Okay. I’ll just skip the interview this time.”

Then, after a while, he accepted my offer.

“Thanks. After all, you are always there for me, marquis.”

“And at times, it makes me feel like a fool,” the marquis once again sighed, bowed politely, and turned around. “What are you doing? Come along now,” the marquis told Malcoy, who looked amazed by events. I nodded, and Malcoy went to stand behind the marquis, who glanced at him, then left my room. Malcoy followed him out. As they disappeared and I was left alone, a mysterious feeling of dread poured into me.

“Why did the marquis concede so easily?”

It wasn’t like Bielefeld to be weak-willed. However, I soon convinced myself that everything was good. That was a mistake. A week passed, and I didn’t realize my mistake until the time I had scheduled for the first meeting with Malcoy came around. Deep into the night, I was waiting for him to come to the place we had agreed upon, but I felt a familiar presence from afar.

It was the Marquis of Bielefeld. I quickly hid myself in the dark and hoped the Marquis would pass me by. But Bielefeld didn’t pass by; he stopped right in front of

me.

“I already know that your Highness is here,” the marquis said, adding, “You can wait, but he won’t come.”

It wasn’t that difficult to figure out the situation. I appeared from the darkness. The marquis, who was looking toward the wrong spot, turned to face me.

“Malcoy leaked everything,” the marquis said with a sigh. Then, he started speaking to me in a tone of reproach.

“He is a depressed man who has already surrendered to his enemies once. How can I give such a position to such a person? If your Highness so greatly wants to use him, you must not hurt his pride.”

I stiffened as I heard the marquis’ words. It wasn’t because the marquis knew Malcoy’s story.

“Please treat him with honor. Your Highness might have done what you did without thought, but even such a thing that you consider insignificant can destroy a man’s pride.”

It was because the marquis was scolding me for the parts of my scheme I hadn’t thought of. It was only after I heard him speak that I could realize that I was overly careless. I began blaming myself, but Bielefeld said in a soft voice, “Now that I know it, it’s done with. Your Highness needs to watch him from now on so that he can establish himself in the kingdom. Fortunately, his talent is rare and outstanding, and soon he will be recognized and established.”

I could only stand still as I listened to the marquis.

“But why the worry? These are things your Highness will get to know over time.”

“I have my reasons. The Empire’s trends seem sinister,” I responded in excuse, and the marquis almost spat out his response.

“It’s all because of this ugliness that your Highness is so worn out! Your Highness hasn’t seen what I have seen so far, so your Highness believes that if you don’t come and take care of it, nothing will be safe.”

The marquis stared at me, gave a short sigh, and told me, “His Majesty and I don’t know what your Highness is concerned about. My staff is analyzing information day and night, so they will find answers soon. The only thing I can tell you in advance is that nothing your Highness is concerned about will happen.”

Bielefeld spoke with a strangely confident tone.

“Before the Empire picks up the sword, it will first be picked up from our side.”

It even seemed like he had prepared several secret strategies.

“Has your Highness’s concerns been resolved, if only a little?”

“No. They got worse.”

I wasn’t just saying it. I couldn’t even guess what the kingdom had prepared, so my curiosity was amplified.

“If you’re not going to tell me, don’t tell me stories,” I stated, and the marquis smiled.

“Don’t be so impatient. You’ll find out soon.”

“Soon?”

“Yes. Soon.”

The meeting with the marquis ended, and my curiosity remained.

When I returned to my palace, I took up my sword. Then I headed to the training hall and started swinging it without stopping — that was the only thing I could do right now.

After swinging my sword all night, the thoughts that had filled my head disappeared like mist in the sun. After all, rather than tinkering with papers and pens, this was a hundred times more pleasurable. Since then, I have spent most of my time wielding my sword. At first, it was to keep me out of mischief, but later, I got drunk on the act of swinging the sword itself.

When I regained my senses, Adelia, who had healed her injury, was swinging her sword next to me. Arwen and Eli had also joined me.

“Shall we try to fight again, after so long?”

It started with Eli — the weakest among the champions I had raised.

“I have to tell your Highness, things haven’t been going good as of late.”

He told me they had no time to respond to the surprise imperial attack properly and that knights they recently dueled with were just chaff when faced with the blades of champions.

“It is only your Highness who could face the Penta Knight as an opponent.”

Bernardo Eli spouted reasons for a duel without stopping.

“When the Nightmare Knights attacked the royal palace, there was not much I could do.”

“Good. Then let’s do it right this time,” I told him. There were no surprises, no magic sword that could sever his soul. Eli said it was an opportunity to prove himself with the sole application of pure skill, and so he gathered light onto his sword when I said I would face him.

And- “No!” Not long after our duel started, Eli rolled to the floor, a scratched mess. I looked at him, laying there as if half-fainted, and turned my head. Arwen drew her sword and pointed it at me.

“Come on,” I arrogantly let energy crackle over the edge of my blade. Arwen took a few deep breaths and then hit the floor. She began to push me back as she poured starlight from her sword. I scattered each one of her strikes, strikes so sharp that they were incomparable to before.

“When you are obsessed with victory, still be aware of your opponent’s subtler movements!”

As we fought, I constantly pointed out what was lacking in her style. Arwen competed with me for a long time and then took a few steps back and lowered her sword.

“I thank your Highness for the match.”

“Do not be shaken and proceed along your current path. Your steps will always be straight.”

“I will keep it in mind.”

Arwen’s sweaty hair and clothes have been a bit messy, but her posture was just as upright as always. I happily sheathed my sword when Adelia stepped up and met my gaze.

“Adelia?”

She didn’t seem very pleased and clearly wanted to duel with me. I looked at her face in wonder, seeing a feeling of resentment in her eyes. I couldn’t figure out whether the emotions resulted from the defeat she had suffered by Duncan Seymour Tudor or whether it was a feeling that her master was to blame, being no help to her while she fought a strong enemy.

I was just glad that Adelia stood in front of me, facing me with a sword by her own will for the first time. I drew my sword and readied it. Unlike Arwen and Eli, the descendants of the Predecessors are quite tricky to deal with properly.

‘Swang!’ A golden flash flew at me. It was a fierce and rough attack that was fundamentally different from Arwen’s sword style, which had a fine balance of power, speed, and skill, or Eli’s, which was as sharp as the wind.

“I feel so good!”

I was excited and swinging my sword like crazy, and only after Adelia was completely exhausted did I step back. As I watched Adelia, who held her sword tightly while gasping for breath, I saw how bold she had become.

“The maid’s shell has just started to peel off.”

Adelia promptly blushed at my words. I had wondered if she would ever become even a little knightly; now I knew that, sooner or later, she would develop a form that was original to her. This wasn’t bad news to me, so I laughed and nodded proudly at Adelia.

“You are all complete monsters,” Eli said, just then waking up and sounding very tired. Only then did I notice that his face was full of scars that hadn’t been there after

I had defeated him. When I came to think of it, there had been something that kept getting caught under my feet as I dueled with Arwen and Adelia, and I had the distinct memory of kicking it a few times.

It was probably Eli. Fortunately, Bernardo Eli was unaware of this fact. We ended training from there, and a few days passed.

And the ‘soon’ that the marquis had spoken of arrived — far earlier than I suspected, and in a way I never thought of.

CHAPTER 241
A GROUP THAT FOLLOWS THE DAWN (5)

As usual, I was wielding my sword in the hall, and Jordan came to me.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!” the ranger called to me several times. Usually, I would have hated the fuss, but this time I couldn’t because the experienced ranger’s face was full of urgency, rare for a hard man such as he. My heart was thumping; it was obvious that something big had happened.

I lowered my sword and waited thusly for Jordan to speak.

“Your Highness, it is said there is a revolt in the Empire!”

My beating heart grew cold. I lifted my sword and took up my stance.

“Your Highness! This is not the time for you to be doing this.”

I replied by swinging my sword.

“If you talk of the fifth princeps’ rebellion, I already know of it.”

“No, I mean another uprising!”

I stiffened, rolling my eyes to look at Jordan, who shook his head in frustration and told me, “The lords of the northeastern region of the Empire have rebelled against the imperial family! Right now, Count Balahard is discussing the matter with the marshal!”

I sheathed my sword and left my palace straight away.

“I will escort you,” said Carls as he and other palace knights led me, with him reminding me of the king’s order barring me from the marshal’s offices. The Bielefeld family knights were blocking off the office and looked at me with nervous apprehension. I knew they wondered if they could stop me if I decided to break the king’s edict and intrude into the marshal’s office.

Their worries were of no use; I had no intention of going in.

“Marquis!”

I stood in front of the entrance and called out to Bielefeld. I shouted with all my might, even adding mana. Before long, the marquis appeared, along with Vincent and Malcoy. Malcoy saw me and halted in his tracks. Perhaps he thought I had come to grab him, and his face was hard as a stone. I ignored him and immediately asked the marquis, “Is this the sword of the kingdom you spoke of, marquis?”

Bielefeld looked at me, saw the ranger, and then turned to Vincent. I could see the subtle rapprochement in his eyes. It seemed that the behavior of Count Balahard, who had broken the king’s edict to deliver the news to me, was unpleasant to the marshal. As a result, Vincent kept his facial expression consistent. He blatantly acted as if he hadn’t known there was such a royal order at all.

“Let’s talk inside,” the marquis told me, his voice pained as he almost spat out the words. I left Carls and the knights behind and immediately followed the marquis.

“That’s right, your Highness. Our kingdom orchestrated the rebellion in the Empire.”

“How on earth did you do it?”

On my last trip to the Empire, I had seen with my own eyes how much the nobility of the Empire feared the emperor. The imperial nobles dared not even breathe loudly in the emperor’s presence and were afraid to make eye contact. That the nobles of such an Empire had rebelled?

No matter how confused the Empire was due to civil war, it was difficult to understand.

“Do you know a man named Degaulle de Devisch?”

Degaulle was a senior imperial knight whom I had embarrassed when he tried to humiliate me on my diplomatic trip to the Empire.

“When I was taken prisoner,” Malcoy, who stood behind the marquis, explained, “he was also taken prisoner. He’s so useless that your Highness didn’t seem to bother with him.”

“Right. But why use him?”

“At the time of the war, he had reassured the first legion commanders who attacked the Gifted Lion Citadel to do so recklessly, giving a guarantee of victory. He was afraid that imperial intelligence might know about it, and worried what they would do once he was released.”

As I heard that, I felt foolish for not immediately understanding why the marquis was mentioning Degaulle’s name. Apart from that, however, I remained skeptical about the possibility that the nobles who served under a tyrannical emperor would listen to the words of a high-ranking knight and so initiate a revolt.

“There would only be his word. If Degaulle is alone, no one would have listened to him. Rather, he would have been hung from the gallows because of his treasonous thoughts.”

The marquis laughed when he heard me.

“Actually, his role was just as a guide, and, to a high degree, he was only a windbreaker. In fact, it’s okay to assume that someone else did everything important.”

“Someone else?”

Bielefeld smiled as he replied to me.

“Count Montpellier himself persuaded the nobles of the Empire.”

My eyes widened when Montpellier’s name suddenly popped up, and the marquis explained the ploy to me. I burst into laughter.

“Somehow, I let him slip from under my nose.”

After he negotiated with Teuton, I did wonder briefly why I couldn’t hear the whining of Montpellier. But then I had guessed that he was doing some petty thing somewhere.

“The task proved easier because most of the officials of the regular army who enforced the emperor’s order were either killed in the war or left with the third princeps to the central region.”

“Even so — how the hell were the nobles baked and boiled?”

Just because the emperor’s ears were absent, his shadow would not disappear completely.

I knew it was not easy for those nobles to overcome the fear of the emperor engraved on their souls and rebel against him. I was curious about what the hell Montpellier had used to convince the imperial nobles.

“He told them that if the civil war ended with the victory of the third princeps, the princeps would search for scapegoats to take responsibility for his disgraceful defeat on the border.”

I laughed again. What Montpellier had done was so Montpellier-like that I laughed out loud.

He was the one who had made nearly half of the nobles in the kingdom turn traitor. He was the one who had threatened the royal courtier and made him betray the royal family after his family had served the Leonbergers for generations. If there was a master of sowing fear and dissension, it would certainly be Montpellier.

“When he was our enemy, he was a cool customer. It’s pretty reassuring to have him under our command now.”

The marquis nodded at my words. “This plan itself actually came from the mind of Count Montpellier.”

“The guy has committed so many crimes that he became convinced that we might stab a knife into his back at any time. But he did something big this time to aid our cause.”

“It might not come to be, but I told him if this goes well, his Majesty might pardon him for all the mistakes he had made thus far.”

It was truly the correct carrot to swing in front of Montpellier’s nose.

“So, did his Majesty accept the offer?”

“He said it depended on the scale of the rebellion Montpellier incites.”

The king's response was also a masterpiece.

Weighing the number of nobles Montpellier convinces to rebel against his past sins was a ploy closer to that of a bargaining businessman than of a man idly trying to alter the situation on the continent. I was happy to see that Montpellier and the king's behavior were consistently different than before.

"Anyway, with this incident, Dotrin's army will be able to focus solely on the enemy in front of them."

The marquis corrected his expression and explained how the rebellion would change the situation. The northeastern lords' rebellion meant that the emperor has now virtually lost control of the eastern region. Bielefeld said the rebellion would enable the Dotrin Kingdom's concerns about disruptions to their supply lines to be alleviated.

"The Royal Dotrin Army, which is now relieved from the burden of possible attacks from the flanks, will ravage the empire's strongholds more heatedly."

The marquis pointed his finger at a section of the map.

"Dotrin's army will stop advancing after taking full control of the eastern territory."

He now pointed to the border between the eastern and central imperial territories.

"And that's when our kingdom enters the war."

At that, I laughed cheerfully. I didn't doubt the marquis now when he had said that the day I awaited would soon dawn.

"But can you tell me all these things?"

"Your Highness already knows what we are doing. And even if I didn't tell you, Count Balahard would tell you everything."

Vincent, who had remained silent up till now, coughed.

"And soon, we will hear more good news," Bielefeld told me, pretending not to see Vincent. "Because Leonberg hasn't prepared only one sword."

I crumpled my face. “As I said, don’t hint at things unless you tell it all to me right away. My curiosity will burst my heart,” I said in a dissatisfied tone, and the marquis chuckled, then laughed.

“What else can I hide from your Highness after I’ve already told you everything?”

Then, with a smiling face, Bielefeld quickly told me about the other scheme prepared by the kingdom. “Soon, all the wizards of the imperial army will be disengaged from the front at once.”

That was also something I didn’t expect.

“I don’t like to admit it,” said Bielefeld with twinkling eyes, “but during the reign of Burgundy, the Empire shines brightly. However, the brighter the light, the darker the shadow.”

Now was the time for the ambitious nobles who were repressed by a mighty power they could not hope to face; the time for those who were crouching and unable to satisfy their greed in fear of the emperor to rise and carve out their own future.

“The great Empire will be shattered. The greed and hunger that had been suppressed for many years will erupt at once, and the high lords will not hesitate to stick their daggers into each other’s backs in order to grab even the slightest chunk of meat.”

Bielefeld made it clear that the era of revolution has arrived. I laughed. The soon-to-be world the marquis spoke of was one I was very familiar with.

At the time when the Great War just ended, when the humans had gained continental hegemony, people all over the world constantly fought for supremacy.

To me, it sounded like saying that the world was going back to that time. The only difference was that the Burgundy family, who had formed an empire and ruled over half the world, has become the largest and most delicious chunk of meat on the dinner table.

“I will go back.”

I woke up straight away. I was going to sharpen my sword and train again until that day came. If you wanted to cut the most delicious slice from a large chunk of meat, you would need to have a sharper knife than anyone else.

I left the marshal and went back to my palace, noticing that the wind blew in an unusual manner. The flags of the Dawn Alliance and Leonberg that were hoisted high above the palace fluttered exceptionally violently. It felt as if a great wind that had been stagnant in front of a massive wall had finally started to flow. It felt as if the same wind blew on all roads leading to my enemies and back. My impression of reality was completely different than before.

The change felt too clear for me to think it was just because I heard the marquis' statement. I quickly identified where my conflicting feelings originated. If I wasn't originally a sword in the past, I had existed as a being for which sight and hearing were everything.

The feelings I would have felt at that time would have also been like this.

"I am truly a warrior."

The only thing that remained for me to do in the face of a monster called the Great War, which has finally begun to materialize, was to cultivate my power to the point that that monster would not eat me.

I hurried my steps. It seemed that I couldn't learn the truth right away without wielding a sword.

* * *

Adrian Leonberger wasn't the only one who sensed the change in the material world.

As the whispers of fate flowed under the snow-capped trees, the pointy-eared tribes stopped what they were doing and looked at the sky.

On dark rocky mountains where none dared to tread, beings with eyes that looked farther than anyone's stomped down heavily upon the earth.

In the deep darkness of the forest that kept its primal appearance, sensitive beasts cried out gloomily.

Everything that had become lost in the Great War and hid in the dark now awakened.

After the long night that had come upon them, many different species were waiting for the rising of the dawn. And they started to shout.

“At last! It has finally begun!” The man sitting on the highest throne was delighted.

“Dawn has come,” the White Night Mage crouching in the deepest depths of the dungeon sighed.

CHAPTER 242
WAR LUCK FLOWS (1)

In the opinion of Malcoy de Marseille, he was not so welcome to the Marshal's staff.

There was a myriad of organizations dealing with information in the world, and not one existed that was welcoming to outsiders. Moreover, this outsider is from the Imperial Army, whom the Leonbergians hate. Malcoy thought he would suffer a great degree of harassment and bullying.

However, this wasn't the case.

The Marshal's staff didn't welcome him, but they didn't ostracize him, either.

Malcoy was embarrassed by this, as he had expected all the trends of harassment. He had learned the reason for this sometime after he had been assigned to the marshal's department: work was being piled up in front of him. Each document wasn't very important, but the amount was enormous.

It was really strange — he sorted the documents all day, but couldn't understand why there was always the same amount of documents in front of his eyes.

No, he wasn't even curious; now, he was just thinking of getting out of this place.

Malcoy looked at paperwork all day, and it seemed that his eyeballs were becoming stained black with ink. The back of the neck was stiff as a stone, and his waist was creaked.

No more… it was impossible.

He looked around quietly. Fortunately, no one cared about him.

Malcoy got up silently from his seat, and no one noticed him leave the room.

Only after exiting the marshal's building could he catch his breath.

“Woo.” He inhaled and exhaled for a long time and relieved his creaking body. Then he suddenly looked at the building. Except for the on-call knights and guards, it was late at night, and everyone was asleep, with the marshal’s building being the only brightly lit one.

“I wonder if Leonberg’s staff always work like this?”

“The kingdom suffers from a chronic shortage of manpower.”

It was then that Malcoy heard an almost sing-song voice behind his back. And as he turned around, he saw that it belonged to the marshal.

“During the years when the kingdom wasn’t powerful, both the meaningful and the powerful became like hermits. No matter what I try to do, I always run out of people.”

Malcoy nodded involuntarily at the words of the marshal.

It was known that the time that the empire suppressed the kingdom had been over a hundred years. If the seeds of talent had run dry, it wasn’t that strange.

“If the circumstances weren’t so dire, no matter how many times his Highness made his request, I wouldn’t have accepted you.”

“I am just grateful that you did.”

“Your job is to thank the Crown Prince,” the marshal replied with a dismayed voice, then asked if anything inconvenienced Malcoy. He shook his head, and the marshal asked him a few more questions. Most of them were questions to make sure whether Malcoy was adapting well to the marshal’s office.

“That’s good to hear. I think what you said is enough to get you away from chores and let you start working in earnest.”

“Are you no longer concerned about my origin?”

“Why would I be? Our kingdom isn’t warring against Marseille. Rather, now I feel camaraderie toward you, I truly feel it.”

Malcoy became speechless as he heard the marshal’s words. Until today, he had been

reluctant to tell the marshal of his true origins, merely telling him he was a prisoner who had been recruited. Now he was very thankful. The marshal was a man he could trust and rely on, unlike a certain other person who had forgotten all about him. Malcoy believed this.

However, it was a hasty judgment. When he woke up, he was sitting at his desk again.

“Congratulations. Starting today, you have become a true staff member of the Marshal’s Department.”

The marshal laughed generously in front of Malcoy, congratulating him, saying that from today he would be handling the true information. Obviously, Malcoy had been about to head to the lodgings provided to him in the palace.

“Okay, let’s start right away. I must report to his Majesty by noon tomorrow at the latest,” the marshal said with a smile, with a kind and generous face. But something felt quite different. The smile that had been just gentle and laid back was now a cunning smirk.

“So I’m merely informing you that, for me to report at noon tomorrow, the work should be done by tomorrow morning,” the Great Marshal said and returned to his desk.

Malcoy stared at his back with a face full of shock, and that was the start. He had to forget about sleeping at night, having to live on a pile of documents. Meals were a luxury, and sleep was a sin. Every day was like hell.

Malcoy recognized this early on and swore a countless number of curses at himself who, in the past, wanted to show his abilities. He hadn’t known it then: to be recognized in the marshal’s department meant that you had to suffer being hit by so much paperwork that you wished for death.

As he lived in such pain day after day, the marshal made a welcoming proposal.

“I’m going to see the Crown Prince. Would you like to go with me?”

Now that Malcoy had adapted quite a bit, he nodded without hesitation, almost begging the marshal to take him along. As long as Malcoy could get out of this place, it wouldn’t matter even if he was going to meet the devil instead of the prince.

And so, he was able to escape from the office after a long time.

“Do we have anything specific to do?” Malcoy asked the marshal, feeling better after breathing the outside air.

“We go because I am suspicious. His Highness is extraordinarily quiet,” Marshal Bielefeld said with a concerned face.

“Isn’t it good if he’s quiet?”

Malcoy wondered why the marshal was worried that the Crown Prince, who liked to have any excuse to go to the battlefield, was strangely quiet. The marshal frowned.

“You need to know these things if you are going to serve the Crown Prince for a long time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When his Highness is extraordinarily quiet — then is the time to be most careful,” Bielefeld said in a tone filled with aversion. “At that time, in all likelihood, he is either trying to get something started or has already done it.”

The marshal’s tone was very serious, and Malcoy nodded, again and again, saying he would keep it in mind. And while having such a conversation, Malcoy and Marshal Bielefeld reached the Crown Prince’s Palace.

“Well.”

Bielefeld’s expression hardened when he saw the door of the palace was tightly shut.

“Why is the door locked at this early hour, and where did the palace knights guarding it go?” the marshal asked and started shouting out loud to announce their visit.

“Open up!”

Shortly thereafter, the door of the locked palace opened, and from it popped a man’s head.

“Ah? The marshal and his staff member.”

He was a man Malcoy had seen several times. Was his name Bernard Eli?

As a knight serving the Crown Prince, the man had received the title of champion, awarded only to Leonberg's very best knights.

"Why does your face look like that, Bernardo?" the marshal inquired.

Eli's face was such a mess that it did not fit the title of glorious champion. He had blue bruises around his eyes, tangled hair, and cracked lips. There was dried blood under his nose.

"Once you come inside, you'll know," Bernardo Eli replied to the marshal in a casual tone. Afterward, he pulled the door open.

'Chik!'

The Great Marshal and Malcoy followed Eli into the palace and stiffened with shock.

"What is this?" the marshal asked as a groan escaped his mouth. Malcoy also looked around with a confused face. The floor has been broken into a mess of rubble, and some walls were cracked or destroyed entirely.

It was difficult to find a place that had not suffered damage, no matter where Malcoy looked.

It was impossible to tell whether this was the palace of a prince or whether it was a ruin that had been swept through by war.

But there was something really absurd: knights were scattered everywhere.

Some were laid out like laundry on a cleanly cut tree trunk, while others were lying like dead bodies half-buried in a mass grave. Others were lying on the broken marble floor.

Malcoy found a familiar face and opened his eyes round.

"Percival?"

He couldn't figure out why his lieutenant, who he thought to be in the Templar Castle, was here at this moment. He was also buried under a heap of soil that had

been gouged out from under the floor.

“You came just when we were resting,” an arrogant voice stated. It was the voice of Prince Adrian Leonberger. Malcoy turned his head and saw the Crown Prince. Muddy dirt covered his brilliant blade, and his clothes were an unsightly mess, all sweaty and torn.

Compared to the ragged forms of the others, the Crown Prince looked relatively fine, but his condition was in no way neat.

“Your Highness? What were you doing in this place?” the marshal asked, and the prince replied profoundly.

“Can’t you see? I’m practicing.”

“Then why are they…”

“They are resting.”

“It seems to me that they are seriously injured and unconscious.”

The prince looked at the marshal with a sense of natural virtue, as if the marshal was being absurd. Then the Crown Prince said with a frown, “If anyone here has fainted, tell me.”

Of course, no answer was heard.

“See? No one has fainted.”

The prince started to laugh, and the marshal was left speechless.

“But what are you doing here?” the Crown Prince asked, and it took the marshal some time to form an answer.

“I came here anxious because your Highness hasn’t appeared outside the palace at all.”

The prince again laughed. “What you mean to say is, you came to see if I was doing anything dangerous.”

“Hmhgm,” Bielefeld coughed.

“As you can plainly see, I didn’t sneak out of the palace, nor did I have any other accidents in particular. There is nothing different than usual.”

The marshal glanced around at the ruin as he heard the prince’s words.

“Oh, that’s strange indeed. To me, the scene inside this palace looks very different from usual.”

“Because I am so passionate about training, it became a little broken.”

“When his Majesty sees this scene, I am already worried about what the hell he will say. Even now, I will call someone to repair the palace.”

The prince shook his head. “Afterward, it will become broken again anyway.”

“Why is that-?”

“It’s time,” the Crown Prince interrupted as he looked around the room. “Everyone, wake up. The break is over.”

Nothing had happened.

“If you don’t wake up, stay there then.”

As the prince said this, he raised his sword.

‘Schoop!’ At that moment, the knights who were scattered about like corpses stood up and took their stances. Malcoy looked to one side.

There was a woman with red cheeks and black hair; and a woman with light brown hair who stood up, seeming to limp on her legs. They were the champions trained by the Crown Prince. They were his knights. The men who stood with dismal expressions were also knights who followed the prince.

There was Bernardo Eli, who had opened the door, and Lieutenant Percival.

Until then, Malcoy had thought the fighting was over; now, his eyes widened. The knights drew their swords at once and aimed them at the prince, the edges of their

blades shining brightly.

“Will you come in? Or should I go to you?” the Crown Prince asked as he arrogantly raised his chin. Instead of answering, the knights charged across the floor. Malcoy’s mouth opened wide. The knights were beaten and scattered to the floor by the prince’s sword in no time. The paladins fared no different; they just took a bit longer to beat than the others and were soon covered in dirt as they were forced to roll to the floor.

‘Shh!’ The air behind the Crown Prince shook, and from it, shadows in green cloaks emerged. The Crown Prince mercilessly pushed away Percival and kicked out toward the shadows in an arc.

‘Puck!’

Malcoy heard a dull noise, and the shadows were battered back one after another. One of them rolled over the floor for a long time before jumping up. They were the half-elf prosecutors who followed the prince. Even after Malcoy had watched for a while, it was still unclear to him whether this was a mass duel or something else. The crown prince had defeated all the knights, without exception.

Fallen knights scrambled and rose up, once again running at the prince — again and again, again and again, all in a repetitive cycle.

When they finally fell to the floor and stopped getting up, the prince lowered his sword and looked around.

“We’re not enough, me and all of you.”

To Malcoy, the prince’s face looked like that of a person suffering from starvation.

“Marquis,” the prince suddenly turned toward the Great Marshal, “gather the Templars and the kingdom’s champions.”

“Why all of a sudden?”

The Crown Prince responded as if the answer was self-evident.

“Why? We have to prepare for war. Before a war, shouldn’t we sharpen our swords?”

He spoke with a resolute voice, leaving no room for compromise. Malcoy realized that it was exactly as the marshal had said:

‘When his Highness is extraordinarily quiet, then is the time to be most careful.’

‘At that time, in all likelihood, he is either trying to get something started or has already done it.’

This was the very situation the marshal had warned Malcoy of.

“That’s just the beginning,” said the prince, “Next, we gather all the knights of the kingdom.”

Even though the marshal had suspected the prince was up to something, this turned out to be far more than he had been expecting.

CHAPTER 243
WAR LUCK FLOWS (2)

Upon receiving the report of Marshal Bielefeld, the king burst into laughter.

“Even though I didn’t know what he was up to, I thought it was strange that the child who always runs as wild as a calf with horns on its ass was so quiet.”

“I am very concerned as to how the champions will interpret his Highness’s will,” said the marquis, who was currently sporting an embarrassed expression.

“My son’s will might not be very pleasing to the proud champions. There may even be those who make excuses and reject his mustering order.”

“I’m sure they’re not going to do that, but I’m also sure that they won’t move easily.”

The king gave a slight nod, then answered with a determined voice. “Then we have to make them move.”

“If-”

“I will send messengers to them myself. I will make them gather in the name of the king.”

“If so, my work will be much easier, and his Highness will also thank you.”

“What is there to thank?” The king shook his head. “It was just a while ago that my child was seriously injured, finally waking up. His superficial wounds were healed by magic, but seeing as he had been cut so deeply by that sword, he can’t be fine already.”

Suddenly, the king’s face grew younger.

“But my son is having such a fierce time of it. He is preparing for the future, thinking that it is a waste of time to take care of his body. It takes a great deal to stop a heart as mighty as his with mere words.”

The king had said that he could still clearly see the prince fighting with the Penta Knight. He added that, even though his son's own body had been covered in blood, he had not taken a step back; the king would never forget the Crown Prince's appearance in that moment.

"In what world will this be the only time? He has survived so many ugly fights at the risk of his own life."

At this, the marquis' face also turned dark.

"I lift the ban imposed on the Crown Prince accessing confidential information as of now. Great Marshal, you are to spare no effort in helping him in everything he does."

"Is there anything else, Your Majesty?" the marquis asked, and the king replied in a more determined tone.

"However, the command prohibiting his departure is still in full effect. Don't deny him any support he needs, but make sure my son doesn't get caught up in dangerous events in any way."

"I always keep that in kind, and I will keep it in mind again, Sire!"

The king, finished with the rough briefing, suddenly looked behind him.

"Count Stuttgart."

The palace knight commander, who had been standing silently by, bowed his head at the king's call.

"Go."

The old knight stiffened as he heard the king's curt order.

"Don't tell me you can't leave me if I order you to. I don't believe that your palace knights' skills are so poor that they can't protect me just because you are away for a while."

Facing a king who gave no room for compromise, the count turned tail and left the room with a reluctant face. It seemed that he needed time to prepare his heart before he could face the prince he had once thrown out and stopped teaching for being an

inferior student.

* * *

The first to respond to the mustering order was the commander of the Templars, stationed two days away from the royal palace.

“What else could have happened?”

York Willowden, Templar Commander, headed to the royal palace with his knights, even though he was very puzzled by the second mustering order to be issued within a single year.

“Go to the prince.”

The king met the Templars, said a few formal words of welcome, and instructed them to go straight to the palace of the first prince.

“Why did the Crown Prince ask for us?”

York Willowden once more led the Templars on, this time to the prince’s palace. He hardened when he saw the view through the wide-open door.

The first prince stood in the middle of his ruined palace.

“You are here! I’ve been waiting all this time after hearing you have arrived at the palace. Welcome, Count Willowden.”

The prince smiled as he welcomed them. The greeting was somehow eerie, and York Willowden couldn’t stop himself from looking around. The Crown Prince’s knights were garbed in battered armor, and the floor had turned into more of a plowed field than its previous marble splendor. Twisted pieces of iron lay scattered about. A strange light of pity passed through the other knights’ eyes as they saw the Templars.

“I will ask you Templars, what is more important: is it your pride and honor as knights,” York turned his head and saw that the prince spoke with a wide grin, “or is it a brighter future and greater glory for the kingdom?”

York Willowden answered without hesitation.

“For the glory of the Lion! Fight with lion’s claws! It is part of the oath we Templars take when we are first ordained.”

The prince simply smiled, as if he had known this all along.

“It sounds like you are saying that you will live for the kingdom – even if your honor and pride as a knight is dragged through the dirt. Did I understand properly?”

“Although such an expression is too extreme and radical for my tastes, it is not far different from the founding purpose of the Order of Templars.”

“So you assure me that the name of ‘Templar’ is synonymous with being the sword of the Leonberg Kingdom?”

York Willowden nodded in reply.

“That’s a good thing.”

At this, York soon realized his mistake.

“Eli,” the prince said, his voice echoing terribly, and the palace door slammed shut.

“From now on, I will treat you like a sword rather than a knight.”

York Willowden had seen Bernardo of the Eli family standing at the door; he now turned back to the Crown Prince.

“You will look to me as your hammer and your anvil.”

“What does your Highness mean?” York Willowden asked with a frown, and the Crown Prince laughed deeply.

“From now on, I mean to beat you without ceasing.”

The prince drew his sword.

“All the things I will do to you here are for you to be reborn as sharper swords.”

The sword that had become so famous in the kingdom that none didn’t know its name, Twilight, began to cry with a loud wave of sound.

“Please do not blame me.”

It was the moment when the fate of the Templars and York Willowden was decided.

* * *

“Hfoo.” Arwen Kirgayen looked around as she tried to catch her breath. The Templars scattered across the floor caught her eye. Next to them lay the palace knights and those from Balahard, all on the floor, all wearing warped armor pieces. There were only a handful of knights, including the champions, still holding their swords and standing on their two feet.

“Today is the first day, so let’s end it here. It will be more difficult tomorrow, so take a rest,” the prince said as he rasped his sword into its scabbard, turned around, and disappeared to his rooms.

“Huh. What the hell is this?” The commander of the Templar Knights looked at the empty spot where the prince had stood and laughed. Arwen sighed as she watched the scene because she saw the dissatisfaction and embarrassment that appeared on the faces of the Templars scattered over the floor. As it was, Arwen didn’t want to act high and mighty and so earn their resentment, so she went to stand before Count Willowden, who had once been her commander, and explained to him that these were pre-war preparations, a fact that the Crown Prince had not sufficiently mentioned.

“His Highness is concerned that if the skills of the knights of the kingdom do not advance, our casualties will increase when the war begins again.”

York Willowden responded with a sigh at her words, in a much calmer voice than Arwen had feared he would have.

“A few years ago, when his Highness first visited the Templar Castle… I directly told him that the name of the Templars would never fade because of a few defeats while dueling. Perhaps his Highness is thinking about this event as an extension of that day.”

Fortunately, it didn’t seem that York Willowden was greatly offended.

“I’m just concerned that if we neglect the proper procedures and forms and act outrageously like this, it may breed useless resentment,” Arwen observed.

York was embarrassed and dissatisfied because, some time ago, he could not wield his blade to curb the threat of the Penta Knight attacking the royal palace, and this made his sympathy for the prince's concerns much greater.

If that wasn't the case, Count Willowden might have stopped talking because Arwen, who could be said to be close to the prince, was in front of him.

Unlike other champions, the Templar Commander was a man who possessed a mind geared more toward the computational aspects of reality, for he was more like a politician than a knight.

"Tchu. I can see what you're thinking when I look at your face."

Your Willowden was a man with a depthless mind and greatly loyal; he could discern that which Arwen had left unsaid.

"I am also a knight. For me, there is only respect for His Highness, who gained victory against a Penta Knight when I had given up. How pleased I am with the opportunity to be taught by such a knight!"

However, contrary to Arwen's assessment, York's motivations weren't just political. The aspiration and respect that flared up in his eyes were real.

"Of course, being in my later years, it is unpleasant to roll over the floor like this."

York Willowden sighed, shook his head, and shouted, "How long are you going to lay around looking like ugly seals!"

The Templars' eyes shone as they heard his words, and they rose to their feet.

When Arwen looked at the Templars, she suddenly realized that some of them who had seemed dissatisfied with the prince's radical methods have now changed their minds. Not one complaint flowed from them. Their eyes blazed, just like their commander's, and they all seemed eager to clash swords with the kingdom's strongest knight, who had bested a Penta Knight.

Surely- Arwen suddenly turned her head. She watched as York Willowden readied his men and how easily he raised their spirits. Arwen, who had always thought he was solely political, was amazed at his current appearance as a knight. The thought surprised her that even in this current situation, Count Willowden was running

complex calculations through his mind, though of a more tactical nature.

“This isn’t a complicated situation, but it does make me remember that I couldn’t keep the promise I had made to an old friend in his lifetime, but I will make sure to keep it now,” York Willowden told Arwen in passing, having felt her gaze.

For Arwen, it was hard to tell to what extent the man was sincere and how far he had calculated current events. However, in the midst of all this confusion, if there was one thing Arwen was sure of, it was that York Willowden would the reassuring ally of the Crown Prince in the near future.

The commander did not fail her expectations.

In response to the muster, the champions gathered at the first prince’s palace, and they couldn’t hide their troubled expressions after hearing of the prince’s proposal.

“Haha, it is true.”

The palace knight commander had been the nearest but was the last to arrive due to his duties. He gave a vain laugh, feeling embarrassed that he was now in a position where he would be taught by one to whom he had once given sword lessons.

“I don’t know about his Highness’s swordsmanship, but now I am too old to change my habits. Please take this into account,” said Count Joachim Schulz, the first champion, whom the prince had met for the first time at the recent banquet.

“Hmm.” Count Richter Lichstein, who had thought with the prince in the final battle against the Warlord, did not openly refuse proceedings but was not very pleased.

They all acknowledged the Crown Prince’s status, who had gained victory over a Penta Knight, and expressed subtle reluctance to be part of the event while paying their deepest respects to the prince.

“What’s wrong with becoming stronger?”

Eli seemed unable to understand these champions, but Arwen fully understood their embarrassment.

It was a separate matter from the reverence they felt for the Crown Prince. They were now to be taught by one less than half their age, which in a way, threw dirt on

the many years they had spent wielding their swords. Then York Willowden came out.

“Now, now, don’t be like this. Come see me for a second.”

He spoke with the other champions one by one. And each time, a champion who had not been pleased with the current situation changed their attitude and showed their intention of joining the practice.

Arwen looked at York Willowden, wondering what the hell he had said to persuade them.

“He probably told them that they were acting like little boys and not upright knights, so I mustn’t be curious anymore,” Arwen muttered to herself. Seeing their expressions, it was somehow difficult for her to ask for details.

So Arwen consistently pretended to be unaware, even though she saw the changing attitudes of the champions.

And so, the training began.

The gifted champions’ resentment was poured out on York Willowden once they became desperately beaten by the prince’s sword.

“Wouldn’t it be better for me to roll over a dirt field than to roll in this puddle of blood?”

But York took it all in stride. The champions still remembered the words he had spoken, even if they became outraged and angered. So, along with the other knights, they became covered in dirt every day as they were battered to the floor.

Time passed in this manner.

At last, the champions who had rebelled became accustomed to the radical training method and to being constantly defeated and messed up.

“His Highness the prince must be a genius.”

“No one who has achieved this much in such a short period of time will be defeated by what the world throws at them.”

“It’s a talent that has never been seen in history. It’s simply amazing.”

Forgetting that they crashed face-down to the floor every day, the champions admired the amazing state of being Prince Adrian had.

“His dance poetry, which can be called his real power in battle, hasn’t come out yet, and he defeats us so easily?”

Bernardo Eli, who looked more grievous and gloomy than anyone else after facing the prince with all his heart, spoke in a poignant tone. “Since winning against the Penta Knight, his Highness has grown amazingly. Now it is hard to face him as an opponent, even without him reciting dance poems.”

Adelia Bavaria, who was in a relatively intact state, praised the Crown Prince with a shy face but in a voice full of pride. Except for Percival Altringen, whom the prince had excluded from these later duels due to a fear for his safety, all the gifted knights expressed their admiration for the Crown Prince. But even while they were talking, Arwen didn’t say a word.

She just always looked into the direction of the prince’s departure at the end of training with an anxious face. It was only a month or so since all the champions had gathered to start training, but in reality, this radical training began three months before that.

And the Crown Prince has not skipped training for a single day.

Others, for brief periods, would let go of their swords to take care of their bodies, but only the Crown Prince kept at it all the time. Just because he was the prince didn’t mean he wasn’t hurt.

He, too, suffered numerous small and large injuries in the midst of the intense training.

In recent weeks, the degree of his wounds has grown even more serious after the joining of the old men. Even if the wizards of the royal palace took care of the wounds, there was a limit to what they could heal. It was impossible to make the torn and damaged muscles and bones heal in just one day, although magic did heal the wounds superficially.

There was no way he couldn’t feel the pain of being cut and torn, and swinging his

sword every day until his mana ran out couldn't be painless.

It was surprising that he showed an overwhelming presence in the battle with the knights, which included many champions, with a damaged body. That was why Arwen's concern ran so deep.

The Crown Prince is also a person. He is not a man forged out of iron.

It was natural for it to hurt when you are cut and for you to rest if you were hurting.

In fact, Arwen many times saw the prince frowning in pain, even if it was only the slight raising of an eyebrow whenever he was slashed or stabbed by a blade that drew blood.

Others never seemed to notice these signs. The depth of their age and the height to which the prince had risen, a height that even gifted knights could not dare to measure, made them blind.

Others didn't notice, but the prince's own knights knew him too well.

Unfortunately, however, there weren't many who would dare face the truth about the Crown Prince's state. Carls Ulrich fell out of the fights early on every time and couldn't afford the effort to study the prince's situation. Bernardo Eli wasn't compassionate enough to think about it in the first place.

Arwen began to believe that even if the prince's forearm was to be severed, he would just mumble, 'Now I can't fire a bow anymore.' The intense knights of Winter Castle would never say anything; they were the same as he.

Only Adelia Bavaria also seemed to be aware of the Crown's Prince's state, but unfortunately, she wasn't one who would ever oppose what her master was doing.

After all was said and done, Arwen was the only one left — but she couldn't hold the prince back.

There had been a few times in the past when she came out and told him he was pushing himself too far, but this time, she couldn't.

Arwen knew that when the prince had that anxious face as if he was chasing something, there wasn't a word out of all words that would strike his ears.

“Not enough. We still lack a lot.”

Several times a day, the prince’s statement that he lacked challengers made Arwen unable to confront him. He was very nervous; he was quietly preparing for something soon to come.

Arwen didn’t know what, but she guessed it was something ominous.

Even in the war with an empire that ruled half the continent, the prince had been impatient to an unsettling degree, as if he could not endure existing without constantly exerting himself.

Several times now, Arwen has tried to ask the prince directly, but she couldn’t open her mouth to do so for some reason. One day, he spoke to her in a subdued tone, as if he had noticed her worries.

“Words have power, and there are things that make their existence clearer just by taking them out of our mouths. I don’t want to empower their existence with my words right now.”

However, in the day-to-day world, sometimes the answers that do not show their faces, no matter how much one worries about them, come to reveal themselves. And there is no universal law stating that the answers we come to face will be welcome ones.

That was exactly the case now.

One day, two months after the Crown Prince summoned the champions, a messenger came riding to the palace — with a red flag flapping behind his back, signaling an emergency.

CHAPTER 244
WAR LUCK FLOWS (3)

I promptly woke up from my nap. Even though I had just woken up, my head felt strangely clear. I hadn't known that my agitated mind would soon lapse into sleep, and this caused an unreasonable irritation within me. It seemed wrong to sleep like this.

With these thoughts swirling in my head, I stood up.

"Waaoh-" I groaned. Arms, legs, shoulders, and back: there was no place that was not painful, no limb that did not creak. I looked at my faintly scarred body and threw a cloak over it. Then I immediately left the room.

"Your Highness?"

So late was the night that the palace knight who saw me opened his eyes wide.

"I can't sleep, so I'm about to go for a walk."

"But why are you going armed…?"

Only after listening to the palace knight did I realize that I still had Twilight in my hand.

"If I can't sleep well after taking a walk, then I'm going to train."

I was quick to come up with a rough excuse.

"I'm going out alone, so I want no one following me."

"The wind is cold. Please don't stay out in the cold for too long."

The palace knight did not hesitate when he opened the door for me. I greeted him and went out to the garden of the palace. I walked like I was possessed.

I just walked and walked past the terrible scene where trees and chunks of grass were scattered all over the place. When I woke up, I found myself standing on the highest spire of the royal palace.

'Thuck,' a thick fur cloak was draped over my shoulders. As I turned my head, I saw that Adelia had followed me, looking at me with the same face as always.

"I hate nights like these."

She looked over my shoulder, nodding her head with a somewhat constricted face.

I turned my head, following her gaze. It was a night sky wherein the moon hadn't even risen, and the starlight couldn't be seen. I looked at the absolute darkness, then turned my gaze back to the far end of the palace — tightening and loosening my grip on Twilight's hilt without pause.

I had been there for a while when a small cloud of dust emerged from the other side of the dark plain. There was a rider with a red flag fluttering behind his back, a messenger riding to inform about an emergency. A long time passed, even though the messenger galloped across the plain without halt before he went through the gates and disappeared among the buildings of the capital.

A bit later, there was a sudden commotion beneath the spire.

"I heard that his Highness the Crown Prince is here!"

It was Carls' voice. Soon after, I heard thumping footfalls as someone ascended the stairs — and Carls appeared on the top of the spire.

"Your Highness! By order of the king, you are to go to his hall right away!"

As I heard Carls' voice, as hard as ever, I grumbled a little.

"Really — I hate nights like these."

* * *

By the time I arrived in the hall, all the prominent figures of the kingdom had already been gathered. They had clearly been summoned in a hurry; everyone had messy clothes.

“Sire.”

“You have come?” the king greeted me with a rock-hard face. He gave me a small nod and looked around. All of those gathered had dark faces, yet only Vincent was angry.

“As always, the defense of Winter Castle is perfect,” Vincent declared.

“So, you say we can not doubt your readiness for winter?” the Marquis of Bielefeld replied, sweating, and in a tone of suppressed anger. “I have to ask you this. Please calm your mind.”

Even after the marquis’ request, Vincent’s face remained cold.

“I only want to say that it is necessary to check if there are any minor problems while you are absent, count.”

Unlike usual, Vincent’s face was livid, and I started to look for someone who could explain the situation.

“It’s a trivial matter.”

While my eyes scanned the hall, the conversation between Vincent and the marquis continued.

“Do you know what it means for Winter Castle if a monster has appeared in the middle of the north?”

Vincent’s face looked as if it would soon explode.

“That is no different from saying that Winter Castle keeps its gates open for them to pass!”

No, he actually exploded right away.

“Do not shout at me like that, count! Did I not ask you to calm your mind!”

“How can I, hearing your insinuations!” Vincent screamed at the marquis.

“If it’s not the truth, then how did this come to be!”

The marquis' tone of voice also increased in volume, frustrated by Vincent's unwillingness to withdraw. Vincent started shouting without pause. Only then could I grasp the situation.

"Why the hell do you keep misrepresenting my words! Listen-"

"Marquis."

And when I finished judging the situation, I interrupted without hesitation. The marquis looked at me, and I shook my head quietly. Then I turned and looked at Vincent. With a single glance, I asked Vincent to calm down. He stared at me, muttered, and turned his head away.

His insides were boiling, and he could not meet my gaze, so he struggled to marshal his anger.

"Let's hear it then. There seems to be a monster in the north. Did I hear it properly?" I asked Siorin after clearing up the situation, for he was the only one among all the people gathered there who had a calm expression.

"There has been an urgent report that three of the villages of Count Brandenburg have become desolate. In response, Count Brandenburg dispatched an investigation team, and they reported that the tracks and signs there did not seem to belong to humans," Siorin explained after nodding at me.

"The residents of the villages have disappeared as if they had evaporated, and the investigation team searched all over. They finally found someone who they supposed to be a villager."

"If they look like a villager, it's a villager. What else can they be?" I asked.

"They found the person, but not alive — it was a corpse. However, the body's condition was so terrible that it was hard to determine whether the remains were even human," Siorin said, and his face became slightly aggravated as he added, "It seemed more like something that had been eaten and discarded…"

"And Earl Brandenburg thought it was a monster's work? So he became worried that there were problems with the defense of the northern pass and dispatched a messenger. Do I understand the matter properly?"

“No more, no less. It is just as your Highness says.”

I frowned at Siorin’s answer. It seemed that the ceaseless premonitions I had as of late were not in error. It was such a damnable situation… I looked at Vincent again. His anger was yet to subside, and I sympathized with it.

While I stayed in the sun-warmed palace and reminisced with the king about past times, Vincent was contending with the monsters that assailed his harsh fortress, always facing the horrors of the past. Vincent’s feelings toward the royal family and other nobles have not changed since those early days I had met him.

If I hadn’t been staying at the royal palace, if I wasn’t set to bestride the battlefield against the Empire, Vincent would never have come to the capital to express his intentions of joining the war. He was the type of person who did not hold the rest of the kingdom in such high regard, so when the marquis spoke of a monster that had appeared in the north and questioned the defenses of Winter Castle, it was natural for him to become angry.

The king also knew this; otherwise, he would never have allowed Vincent to raise his voice in his presence. The marquis was oblivious about Vincent’s nature, I surmised.

However, because the matter at hand was a serious issue, it was necessary to proceed with caution, and I was forced to step forward and calm Vincent’s anger. If I did not, he might come to blame the king, who owed much to the Balahards.

“Marquis. It is forbidden to mention Winter Castle from now on.”

While I understood the concerns of Bielefeld, I had no choice but to side with Vincent.

From now on, it was best to keep the marquis’ mouth shut and so prevent Vincent’s simmering anger from invading his mind again.

“Your Highness- This is an important issue concerning the kingdom’s security. I know of your Highness’s trust in Count Balahard, but when I see the importance of this issue-”

“I won’t say it twice. If there is anyone who doubts the efficacy of Winter Castle from now on, I will not stand for it. In the first place, Winter Castle’s defenses were not lax,” I said firmly, cutting off Bielefeld. “The monsters that attacked Count

Brandenburg's lands didn't flow through the northern pass."

Those gathered in the hall all looked at me at once.

"Neither will the villages of Count Brandenburg be the only ones decimated in such a fashion."

I was sure – this was just the beginning. What happened in the villages of Brandenburg will be reenacted everywhere. All manner of inhuman beings will appear and consume the flesh of the weak, drink their blood. Beings that are stubborn and cunning enough to be incomparable to humans will destroy entire castles and burn down cities. And they shall forge their own kingdom atop the piled corpses of humans, inhabiting their ruined cities and strongholds.

"How…"

The kingdom's people all looked at me with horrified faces.

"I regret this. If I had a little more time, we would have been more prepared."

The arrival of the non-humans came far earlier than I had expected.

I had only gathered the champions and the Templars thus far, and their swords were only now beginning to become refined.

It was unfortunate and quite sad, but not all was lost.

"The monsters that have lived in our lands four hundred years ago have been hunted to extinction."

I looked at Vincent. The blood of the Balahard clan, which they had shed for hundreds of years, had seeped into the walls of Winter Castle, making it a fortress that could not be broken by anything.

"The surviving monsters were driven north, and they are now blocked by a single fortress barring their entry to the south."

We had to honor their dedication and sacrifice.

"Relatively recently, we slew the Warlord and the Overlord, who could have become

greater threats."

We had to honor their victories. Locking eyes with me, Vincent spread his shoulders, his face filled with pride. Upon seeing that, I continued talking.

"Thanks to this, our kingdom will now have significantly fewer entanglements compared to other realms."

This land, which was once the most dangerous place in the world, was now the safest, and I almost burst into laughter as I considered the terrible irony.

"In other areas-"

"In the Empire, and wherever else, there will be chaos."

Seeing everyone stiffen, I told them of the laws of this newly-dawning world.

"If you don't fight and win, you will die. If you can't stop them, you will perish."

Leonberg's people looked at me — some with sharp eyes as if wanting to sort between truth and falsehood, some faces filled with concern, and others with eyes that held only solid faith. In short, everyone was looking at me.

I met their gazes and then turned to the king, looking straight at him as I said, "Send messengers to all the nobles in the kingdom so they can be prepared for the danger. Please allow me to leave."

Then, I added another request.

"Unleash me so that I can tell the mischievous beings who have dared to invade this kingdom who the true ruler of this land is."

CHAPTER 245
THE PRINCE'S VIRTUE (1)

I would make sure they knew who the ruler here was. They would pay for those whose blood they spilled, for coming into this land without permission and harming the innocent. I had confidence in this — and I had prepared for this day.

Though my preparations were not complete, I had at least developed enough strength to wipe out the non-human things that have arisen in this land.

But then – "Not possible."

The king did not allow it.

"Sire!" I shouted, feeling shocked by the unexpected answer.

"It's something we can do without you."

Seeing the king say this without hesitation, I again gave him my reason: I have been sharpening my blade in anticipation of a day like today. If he asked me to explain my plans right now, I could offer him countermeasures, and if I go and wipe them out, I would bring a faster end to this than anyone else.

"Others can do it, but I bet no one can do better than me."

The king nodded at my words.

"Perhaps you are right. No – I daresay that you won't be wrong. You've been weird enough to study the old histories."

"Then-"

"But!" the king exclaimed, cutting me off as I tried to speak half-heartedly. "I will not allow it."

"Why?"

When I asked why, the king looked straight at me and asked, “If something ugly and dangerous happens, are you always going to go ahead and solve it yourself, like you want to now?”

I almost asked what else could be done but instead kept my mouth shut.

“Whenever such unwelcome news arrives, are you always going to grab your sword and abandon your throne?” The king’s eyes spoke far more than his words.

“Is this country such a weak country that we cannot overcome even small difficulties unless you come out?”

I silently listened to the king.

“I’m not trying to blame you,” he said with a smoother expression.

“I know that you have struggled alone because the royal family is not strong, and the kingdom is not perfect. How can I blame you and say that you are wrong?”

However, he was still firm and strict in his way of speaking, leaving no room for dissent.

“But from now on, it must be different,” the king said to me.

“Now that the roots are deep and the stems are firmly stretched, it is time to spread your branches widely. Let those who live on this earth lean on your steadfastness. Let those tired of the winds rest under your benevolence.”

He said that my virtue as a prince is quite different from that of a knight. The king said it to me again and again.

“This is something you cannot achieve if you move lightly. Deep-rooted trees do not easily shake.”

I thought about the king’s wishes for me to become a deep-rooted giant.

Then I decided: the king was making a big noise about this and that, but in the end, he was telling me to stay still without moving my hips even slightly.

“Count Balahard.”

I was just about to challenge the king on this when he called Vincent.

“Yes, Sire?” Vincent addressed the king with full formal respect — with his eyes showing that his old grudge still remained intact.

The king did not rebuke Vincent for being unforgiving.

He just quietly got up from the throne and came down the dais, saying, “As the head of the Leonberger family and as the legitimate ruler of the Leonberg Kingdom, I hereby revoke the title of count that was handed down to the Balahard family.”

“Sire!” I exclaimed, gritting my teeth. I opened my mouth and protested the king’s decision. No, I tried to protest, yet I couldn’t. Despite the absurd king’s declaration, the expressions of the others were so calm. Those who knew better than anyone else about the devotion and sacrifice of the Balahard family did not resist the king’s actions. Only then did I realize that something strange was going on, so I kept silent.

The king, standing upright, glanced at me and turned to Vincent again.

“Vincent Balahard.”

Vincent was insulted to hear the king calling his name without even a title.

He had a cold, cold face that I have never seen before. The king spoke to Vincent again.

“I now award you the rank of Herzog Norden. You are now Duke of the North.”

Vincent’s expression, as cold as ice, cracked.

“In addition, in honor of the noble and unbreakable Balahard spirit that has not changed for hundreds of years, I give the middle name of Erhaben.”

“We honor the dedication and sacrifice of the Balahard family!”

The leaders of the kingdom, including the Marquis of Bielefeld, shouted as if they had been awaiting this moment.

“In addition, we give the title of Stärker Ritter, Great Knight, to the former Count of Balahard, Bale Balahard. We will remember him as a Paladin and honor his

unstoppable spirit and integrity."

"Honor to the indomitable knight! Honor to the Paladin of the Kingdom!"

The palace knights beat upon their hearts at once and expressed their utmost respect.

"Ah…" Vincent looked at them for a long time with a blank face.

"Vincent Erhaben Balahard," the king called Vincent.

"Yes? Yes, Sire?"

"I solemnly express my deep gratitude for your family's dedication and sacrifice, and I bow my head and apologize for the suffering and misery that the Balahard family had to endure due to the incompetent royal family."

These weren't just formal words. The king actually bowed his head, albeit slightly, giving the greatest possible gratitude and apology as a monarch of a country. Vincent, whose face had become half-dead when he heard his new titles, now had a completely soulless face.

He stood there for a while, at last looking at me, trying to whisper. He moved his lips several times, but in the end, he couldn't say a word. I was no different.

Seeing the passions and countless other emotions raging in his eyes was perhaps what left me speechless, or it might have been those self-same emotions that had risen inside of me. I clenched my teeth and forced myself to endure such blessed feelings.

I couldn't even open my mouth and congratulate him — all I could do was give him a small nod of the head. I stretched my shoulders and stood straight, and Vincent, looking at me, also straightened his shoulders and raised his chin.

It was ridiculous: his chin stood so high as if it would touch the sky were it to be raised an inch more.

I could not stop myself from laughing. He looked like a fool, but even so, without knowing when, my chin rose just as high as his. No longer was my vision faint as I energized my eyes and opened them wide. Inside my mind, I felt nostalgic, seeing a

person I had thought I would never see again. If only he had lived a little longer, that would've been great. How proud would he have been, how much would he have enjoyed the moment when his son became a duke?

There was no answer — only the cries of the king and the others were heard.

"Long live the Northern Duchy! Long live Duke Balahard!"

The people of the kingdom called the name of Vincent Balahard, a man who was reborn as a duke.

"Honor to the indomitable knight!"

"Homage to Great Knight Bale Balahard !"

The palace knights pounded their hearts and shouted the name of the Paladin, the first to bear that title in a hundred-and-twenty years.

I closed my eyes tightly as I heard their fervent cheers.

Something hot and wet was crawling down my cheeks.

* * *

The cheers ceased after some time had passed.

However, a fire still raged inside of me, and I saw that the situation was no different for Vincent.

"I'll do my best," Vincent stated in a light tone, his eyes blazing with great intensity.

There was no sign of his earlier resentments, no sign of his old grudge. He had received not only a title, but also an apology and an appreciation for his family's sacrifices.

Maybe someone would curse Vincent for being a snob; maybe they would say that a few words of congratulations were enough for him to forget his grudge and sell his soul.

But I knew — Vincent had never been a snob. He wasn't a fickle person who could

easily be swayed by a few words. Vincent was just simple enough to be honest.

I knew that he had had not wished for a huge reward or a grand apology in the first place. He just wanted people to know of the existence of the stalwart defenders of the stormy walls, the dedication and sacrifice of his family, who were the forgotten defenders of this land.

Vincent just wanted others not to forget.

What he wished for in return for hundreds of years of dedication and sacrifice was so small. And not only Vincent was like this; his father had been the same. I'm not sure, but his ancestors would have been like this as well.

Otherwise, they wouldn't have fought for a long time in that harsh land without anyone knowing of their sacrifice. They were a family with blazing hearts, and their valor did not disappear in the face of the harshest winters. The Balahards were very dear to me.

But then, something happened that I had not expected.

"I will take over this task."

Once again, Vincent proved that his fire would not be doused in the face of winter.

"The monsters that have appeared in the County of Brandenburg- I guess I'll wipe them out."

I didn't expect Vincent to swallow the dinner that had been set in front of me.

"There are thousands of capable trackers serving under me who have seen every shape and size of footprints, and they shall track these monsters. There are also hundreds of courageous knights who do not retreat, no matter what monster they face."

"Indeed. That is very true. No one knows more about monsters than you and your army, who have fought with those coming from the north for generations," the king praised Vincent.

"If your Majesty allows me, I will head north right now and end the corrupt seeds that are the monsters that have appeared in Brandenburg."

Vincent spoke fast as he beat his fist upon his chest, almost ranting.

After the king had chatted with Vincent for a long time, he departed to further discuss countermeasures — along with the marshal and Vincent; everyone except me.

I had to silently stand by and watch them disappear.

“It feels like my foot was just severed by an ax I had forged.”

There was probably no expression that better suited the situation. I cursed Vincent, but that changed nothing. Eventually, I had to go back with my shoulders drooping.

When I arrived at my palace, the knights and champions were waiting for me in the middle of the training hall.

I didn’t even change my clothes and went straight to them and said, “It might be a bit harder today. It is only because of my desire to strengthen the kingdom. Please do not resent me.”

I just wanted to make sure that our campaigns would be short and swift; there was no other reason.

That was why my sword had more power than usual and why the battle continued longer than usual — it was the only reason. Really, it was.

* * *

On that very night, Vincent came to me.

“Why does someone who should be busy defeating monsters come to this place?”

I stood whilst leaning against the door, making sure he saw how I felt through my posture.

“I ran here bearing news that your Highness would like, but it seems you aren’t happy.”

My ears pricked up when he said he brought me likable news. So, I stepped away from the door and pointed to the sofa.

“Why not come in? Come in and sit down.”

Vincent chuckled as he stood by the door and then took his seat.

“What’s this news I’d like to hear?”

“If your Highness hadn’t asked me, I would’ve told you right away.”

Contrary to his statement, Vincent didn’t open his mouth immediately. He just smirked at me, seeming to enjoy the way I wriggled in anticipation.

Then, just before my irritation exceeded my curiosity, that is, just before I ordered him to tell me, Vincent began speaking.

“If it was just confined to the County of Brandenburg, the rangers alone would be able to solve it. But as your Highness said, if something similar happens across the kingdom, your Highness must be there to reduce the damage.”

I suddenly grew impatient and asked, “So? So? What did his Majesty say?”

“His Majesty heard me out, and then pondered for a long time.” Vincent laughed. “He said he would allow your Highness to leave.”

I clenched my fists, then got up and cheered.

“Dear Vincent! I never gave up on my expectations!”

At that moment, the sense of betrayal I had felt toward Vincent was no longer there.

“However, there were conditions,” Vincent said as he looked straight at me. “The official position of your Highness in this extermination team is not as a combatant, but as an escort. Your Highness’s main task is to appease the public sentiment, which has been ravaged by these sudden surprises.”

My smile quickly soured.

“Did I hear you right?”

Many times I asked Vincent to reaffirm it to me.

“Non-combatant. Escort the target. The mission is to appease the ugly public sentiment.”

Each time I repeated my position and role.

“Is your Highness regretting what has come about? You can choose not to come along, but then you will miss our glorious struggle. Should I go back to his Majesty and overturn what I said earlier?”

Hearing Vincent’s words brought me pain, so I quickly ranted out an acceptance.

“Do not worry about it. I intend to be faithful to my mission.”

“That lie, really?”

“Do you know me to cheat with words? I hope not.”

I didn’t tell Vincent of the various possibilities that ran through my head, for he looked at me with doubtful eyes. Our enemy is so strong that it was inevitable that an escort must also draw his sword and fight… or for a noncombatant to accidentally get involved in the battle.

Even on the day that the campaign was launched, Vincent still couldn’t shake off his anxiety and whispered in my ear.

“Once again, please focus on your mission. I mean, don’t think about anything else, just focus on stabilizing public sentiment.”

Even the king came out to the gate, and as he joined me, he started nagging.

“Your task this time is to cultivate the virtues that you need as a crown prince, and you should, above all else, be devoted to taking care of the hearts of the fearful people.”

“I will remember! I will keep it in mind! My head is now full of thoughts on how to quickly stabilize public sentiment!”

I wasn’t lying. I had thought about it all before leaving my palace. And after a bit of worrying, I had finally managed to set up my own plans.

There was nothing that stabilized public sentiment faster than removing the original threat. I didn't doubt it.

So on the very, very, very rare chance that one duty overlapped with the other, then I would have to fight the monsters. After all, it was one of the ways in which to mollify the public.

"Ha, what's this then?"

And that moment came much earlier than I expected.

"I really didn't want to do this."

I gently drew Twilight.

CHAPTER 246
THE PRINCE'S VIRTUE (2)

The campaign's size was not small. The number of regular knights mobilized alone amounted to about four hundred: four knight platoons serving the royal family directly and four that belonged to the Third Legion. The number of soldiers dedicated to the operation was one legion belonging to the Central Army and two Balahard Ranger companies.

A total of 3,200 troops were mustered. To facilitate the extermination, the royal family mobilized all the champions except the palace knight commander.

It was clear that the king was taking this issue seriously, that his will was firm.

He did not want the catastrophe in the County of Brandenburg to spread throughout the kingdom; it had to be ended as soon as possible. The troops began to move as quickly as possible, reflecting the will of the king.

Before the march, Vincent split his troops in five. Each unit included experienced senior rangers who were to search for any traces of monsters. And he chose the champions to lead each unit.

"You will be heading to a different area, not to Brandenburg."

It was only Count Brandenburg who had sent a messenger to the capital, but Vincent did not rule out the possibility that other provinces were already in a similar situation.

This was entirely in accordance with my warning that non-human things would appear throughout the kingdom, and it was in line with the king's will to end the chaos as quickly as possible.

I gathered the champions to me before they left.

"Don't miss a single clue. Even if it is considered a false rumor, be sure to check it."

I asked them again and again, one by one, making sure they looked me in the eyes.

“Because everything that will happen from now on will be strange things that you have never experienced before.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Whatever it might be, would it be odder than what we experienced in the forest?”

The curt yet powerful answer was Arwen’s, the drawn out and impertinent question was Eli’s.

The old knights, including York Willowden, responded briefly to my words and promised to keep them in mind.

“See you again soon,” Arwen greeted me, and the champions marched off in their separate directions. Now, the only Master left at my side was a good and gentle woman, yet an out of control woman whose eyes only shone when she shed blood.

“Now you don’t have to stay in a stuffy carriage,” Vincent said from behind me as I watched the champions lead their troops away.

“I’m escorting you to the target.”

“There’s no law saying the escort can ride outside a carriage, now is there?” quipped Vincent adding, “And how bad do you think I am? Do you think I don’t have eyes to see for myself?”

Vincent laughed, revealing his teeth. Seeing him smile, I suddenly looked around. The Blizzard Knights of Winter gave me deep, wordless glances. Gwain and the other Dawn Knights stared at me; their faces sickened, as if having nothing in familiar with anyone.

It was only then that I realized that all warriors present were pure Winter Castle troops.

“It’s been a while since I felt like this.”

“Enjoy the mood and only the mood. Never forget that your Highness’s job is to appease public sentiment.”

“We have to move as fast as possible, it will be a big deal if the monsters move on to other villages,” I said with a bloody smile, and Vincent started marching again. After a brief pause of looking at their commander’s back, the troops of winter marched after him.

The light-bodied rangers and northern knights marched on tirelessly, almost day and night. So, we soon reached the borders of Brandenburg County.

“Company Captain Jordan.”

“Yes, commander.”

“I’ll leave half of the rangers in your charge, with the order of letting the count know of our arrival. Afterward, start your search.”

Vincent had become a duke, yet the Balahard rangers still treated him as their count, Winter Castle’s commander. They treated him as if they didn’t much care about titles but rather deeds.

Vincent also seemed to have no intention of correcting his title.

“What happens if you find signs of the monsters?” I asked Jordan.

“The monsters, who have just fed, will stay in one place. But if they have already moved on, it will be harder to track them down.”

“I will leave it to your judgment, whether you pursue them or even engage in battle. If necessary, you can use my name and ask for the support of Count Brandenburg,” Vincent ordered Jordan without hesitation.

It was possible to miss a monster by making a mistake, or the rangers could become injured, but I knew the possibility was extremely slim. Jordan was a ranger who served long enough to be counted among the best in Winter Castle.

“Then I’ll start right away.” Jordan turned around and started marching off, but then he turned around and came to stand before me.

“Don’t be too disappointed if I take all of your Highness’s kills. Because… I almost forgot that you are a noncombatant on this mission. Why did I keep forgetting that?”

And this was how Jordan chose to greet me at the very start of our mission. Seeing that nasty face of his, I wanted to jab my fist out and punch him on his disgusting snout right away.

“Jordan.”

But instead of caving his nose in, I told him with a gentle smile, “You are in a lot of trouble.”

“I am grateful for knowing that.”

“What do you think I’m going to do? This time, it will be particularly painful.”

“Yes, it’s just more hard work. I’m always doing it. There is nothing new about it anymore,” the ranger cheekily responded, bowed his head, then passed me by.

“We are going on a mission, guys! Let’s go!” Jordan shouted energetically, and the veteran rangers formed up in rank behind him.

“My company has to march out now. If we don’t get there now, we won’t be worth our names.”

“I hope you enjoy your work, Jordan. I hope so very much.”

“Shut up! Follow me, men!”

The scene was as it always is: Jordan arguing loudly with the senior rangers until they soon disappeared from view.

I muttered in their direction after they were gone.

“He does have a very hard time.”

I mourned a little when I thought of the tough days yet to come for the ranger.

Jordan and I met again exactly two weeks after meeting Count Brandenburg and after appeasing all the communities in his estate for the unfortunate thing that has happened. It was after I had expressed the firm determination of the royal family on this issue. Jordan’s face upon our Reunion was as exactly as I had expected it to be.

In short: He couldn't sleep well one day, then the next, and for many days after that. Jordan, who had clearly not slept a wink after facing all manners of hardship, came out directly to face Vincent and started to complain.

"I've never seen something so weird in all my years in this world!"

The events of the past two weeks flowed out of the ranger's mouth. It sounded good at first.

Thanks to the monsters rampaging everywhere, they left many traces of their passing. Things went smoothly at first, and it was exciting. But Jordan said that he wasn't very excited when they lost all trace of the beasts three days ago.

"It suddenly rained, and all traces were washed away. Still, who am I? Aren't I Jordan, the best tracker in Winter Castle? Somehow, I was able to use my wits and catch their tell-tale signs again."

In a tired voice and with an exhausted face, Jordan still took the energy to praise himself.

"These guys run all day. They really seem to sleep while running. Even though the ground is like this, so craggy and rocky, they keep on running. If they are hovering around here, above our heads, I won't be surprised."

Only then did Vincent, who had been listening to Jordan for some time, speak.

"What kind of monsters are they?"

"I do not know. I couldn't even see them – we could only follow along. That's how fast they are."

Jordan reported as much as possible as quickly as possible, and Vincent's expression hardened to the blatant answer.

"But that doesn't mean I didn't have any income at all," the quick-witted ranger said. "These guys go on horseback."

"What?" Vincent frowned.

"I'm sure of it."

“Even when I had seen monsters tame beasts like wolves, I’ve never known of any monsters taming horses.”

“That’s why I thought it was strange. I wondered if it was a horde of magical foes disguising themselves as beasts… But then again, if you consider the smell of their droppings, and you know what kind of meat they ate, the case is far different.”

Jordan poured out words that sounded like excuses, expressing doubts about some other mystery he struggled to understand.

When I asked what it was, he answered, “They never get off their horses. They eat rice on their horses – and sleep on their horses.”

Vincent said that this type of monster surely existed entirely upon their mounts.

The moment I heard this, a memory flared up in my head.

“Is it them?” I muttered, deep in thought. Vincent and Jordan turned to me.

“Have you guessed something?” the ranger asked me, and I nodded. Wanting a more immediate report, Vincent ignored me and turned to Jordan. “There are some things I don’t understand.”

Jordan’s report accurately pointed to one of the ancient beings I knew of. However, the carnage and horror unleashed here did not match their nature as I knew it to be. So, I found out.

“While you were pursuing them, have they attacked a village, even once?”

Jordan shook his head in response to my question.

“They just ran all day. They didn’t seem to have the time to raid a village.”

I frowned. “You were chasing the wrong group.”

Jordan countered my words.

“It can’t be. All of the traces left at the scene led to only one trail leaving the scene — that of the abominations that are neither beasts nor humans that we are pursuing.”

Vincent stepped up and looked at me and Jordan alternately.

After listening further to Jordan's observations, I felt that what he was saying was right. The experienced judgment of the ranger got stuck in my mind.

"Another village four days west of here lies in ruin!"

With swift timing, a messenger from Count Brandenburg came and gave us the answer.

Jordan looked at me, and his face was full of doubt. I understood why he felt like that. The target Jordan was pursuing wasn't in the west, nor was it four days away.

"Vincent."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

Vincent, while still contemplating the overwhelming chaos, answered me right away.

"I guess you'll have to divide your troops again."

I suggested that I share a bit of my accumulated historical knowledge with him.

Vincent frowned.

"What is the identity of the beings who attacked the village, and what is the identity of the beings we were instead chasing?"

"I still don't know the identity of those who attacked the village."

I had no way of knowing for sure, as I had not seen it with my own eyes.

Vincent's face quickly showed his disappointment. But that lasted only for a while, as he soon asked me, with shining eyes, "That's like saying you know the nature of the one's we've been chasing."

"Everybody knows that, surely," I told Vincent, and the dark faces of those around me quickly brightened.

They were all relieved that I knew of the identity of at least one of the entities that

had invaded the kingdom.

“Was is it?” Vincent asked me, and instead of answering him, I turned in Jordan’s direction, casting my gaze over the wide horizon.

“They think of running as a virtue — and of halting as sin. They are a tribe who call themselves ‘The Sons and Daughters of the Windstorm.’ Warriors who are born fierce and courageous; they are the hoofed ones.”

While looking over the vast plains, searching for any signs of riders, I told everyone what they were.

“Centaurs.”

We were chasing beings that were half-human and half-horse.

“As far as I know, they never attack humans without cause, nor do they covet human flesh. If they’re pissed of, though… that makes a difference.”

“Divide your troops,” I urged Vincent.

“This is urgent. We need to cover more land.”

“Go ahead, before the carnage increases.”

“Don’t worry about it, just do it quickly.”

I kept pushing Vincent. I told him it was necessary to hurry up to prevent innocent deaths.

Vincent looked at me with suspicious eyes and finally decided after contemplating it for a time.

“It’s a good point. I will leave the Winter Knights and half of the rangers with your Highness.”

Vincent turned to Carls, who stood beside me.

“Make sure that his Highness quickly reaches Count Brandenburg.”

Vincent didn't forget to make sure I was closely watched and kept away from battle.

"I don't think we'll get into that much trouble," I stated.

Vincent ignored me.

"I will come back as soon as possible," he told the troops with me, unable to hide his anxiety, and then left as he headed off with the messenger.

"No way that the things we are chasing are the centaurs from the old stories…" Jordan stated.

"However… in all the stories I've heard, they are pretty peaceful. Aren't they?"

I gave a slight nod.

"The centaurs are not hostile, but they are still vicious enough to sufficiently protect themselves. There have been very few times when centaurs have run wild, and there were always reasons for it."

This was an exceptional case, with them being hostile to humans and butchering them in their villages. Still, I was sure if it was indeed the case.

"You said they are not hostile to humans!" Jordan yelled at me.

"In general, that's the way they are."

"Then what do you call that!"

A rising dust cloud could be seen moving across the plain, and Jordan's finger pointed to it. The beasts were leveling their rusty cavalry spears. I saw about fifty centaurs charging on under that dust cloud.

"Rangers! Ready battle formation! Firing line!"

"Load crossbows!"

"Protect your charge!"

As I watched the rangers, Carls and others surrounded me, and I drew Twilight.

“I’m forced to do this,” I muttered and turned my gaze upon the dust cloud that was rising over the knights and rangers who surrounded me.

There was an extraordinarily huge centaur leading the charge.

His lower equine body had a bronze torc over its chest; the upper body was that of a copper-skinned man, and upon his head was a bronze crown.

This hoofed Sword Master was a clan hero of great power, and he could turn warriors into bloody messes in an instant.

He was the Prince of Centaurs, and his eyes stared into mine.

“Make way,” I whispered as I gathered light on my blade.

The knights saw the brilliantly shining Twilight and opened a path for me.

The centaurs charged without hesitation at the path being opened.

“Meet their charge!”

The voices of the knights behind me bellowed out, and the centaurs charging at us gave a fierce roar.

And in the middle of it all, I-

“I feel so good!”

At this, I laughed out loud.

CHAPTER 247
THE PRINCE'S VIRTUE (3)

"Your Highness!"

"Put down your visor!"

After laughing aloud for a definite amount of time, I lowered my visor upon the suggestion of the knights.

'Cheolkup!'

My wide field of vision quickly narrowed as a result of this. The scent of iron stabbed into my nose. The sound of hooves thundering over the earth echoed in my ears.

'Waahhaaa!'

The skin tingled as I heard the wrathful roar of the centaurs.

"Narrow the gap!"

"Meet them in their charge!"

My heart jumped madly in my breast as I heard the knights shouting out loud. I looked through the slit in my helm and stared at the fierce onrushing enemy.

The centaur clan's hero was galloping at us with fierce, blue-blazing eyes. Meeting that extraordinary gaze, it felt as if a window had been turned upon my soul, as if something invisible was stabbing at my heart.

"Fwooo," I exhaled a deep breath. The heat from my body was flowing up into my helmet. My face burned as if it had been seared away. The heat made my lips twitch; my eyes shook in their sockets. My entire body was informing me that I was now on the battlefield. All thoughts that filled my head gradually faded away.

The constriction that had beset my heart disappeared as if it was never there. I felt

truly alive, and I stabilized my breath.

However, something was still lacking — my mouth was dry, and it felt like my throat was burning. And I knew all too well how to quench this thirst.

It was only once I broke the enemy's body and scattered their blood upon the earth that my thirst would be slaked. A pair of knights interposed themselves before me. One of them was a woman in whose heart a battle-thirst has settled. She was like me, but our patience to endure our deprivations was not the same.

She was Adelia, a butcher and war maniac. Facing a centaur of great power, she raised her sword, and a golden cloak of energy gathered over it.

Looking at the charging foe, I kicked my horse straight in its flanks.

I wasn't going to let someone sink their sword into the dinner that has been prepared for me. I gripped Twilight and stopped talking. Then, finally, the centaurs' dim faces came into view; I could see the veins protruding from their coppery upper bodies clearly.

''Silent are the snowy peaks and the blood-drenched walls''

''Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!''

I began reciting war poems.

''The birds who've flown back along the road the wind passed by return''

''The fortress once exposed to cold and snow now wakes and stretches.''

I sang of the spring that has come to the Winter Knights.

'Wooow!'

The magnificent energy wave of one hundred knights spread all over the area.

'Hwaak!'

Their martial spirit soared. They had greater battle lust and fighting spirit, and their collective energy sharpened like a sword.

I gathered the momentum that was raging out in all directions.

‘Woow!’

The flames of my true spirit swept along the edge of my sword and began burning with great intensity. Holding a sword of infernal flame, I kept on charging.

Then, when the Centaur Prince’s vague features became clear, I let go of the reigns and gripped Twilight in both hands.

“Bfaa,” I took short breaths as I pointed my sword out at an angle. In the next instant, I gave a swift, downward jab.

‘Hooah!’ The Centaur Prince cried, clutching his neck.

‘Hwaaohoah!’ The centaurs charging in roared as they split their force in two.

“The enemy is trying to flank us!”

“Knights on the wings, ready for collision!”

The knights roared as they readied themselves.

However, the expected flanking maneuver did not occur. The centaurs charged past their fallen allies.

“Fire!” A ranger yelled.

‘Sasasasak,’ the sound of crossbow bolts piercing through flesh was heard one instant later. I twisted my waist, looking behind me. The centaurs were struggling to close on the rangers. When the distance shortened, the Balahard Rangers put aside their crossbows and drew shortswords from the calf-skin sheaths buckled to their waists.

“If you want somewhere to aim at, start with their legs!”

Veteran rangers took the lead as they readied their shortswords before them.

Seeing that, I leaned into my horse’s flanks. I was going to make a wide turn and hit into the rear of the centaurs. But there was no opportunity; the centaurs flanked the

rangers, avoiding the crossbow bolts where they could — with not one of them throwing the javelins that they held.

“Huh?”

I studied the centaurs as I charged after them. They galloped for a long time without looking back until they finally reeled around as they came to a halt. They fixed the long tips of their lances forward, and there was no mistaking their intent of defending themselves.

‘Fuwook!’

In the next instant, the Centaur Prince stepped forward and drove the point of his spear deep into the ground. He stood before me, unarmed, both arms spread wide open.

“…!” He spoke in a guttural, stuttering language. His voice was very hoarse and his pronunciation messy. It was not easy to understand what he said.

“……! Bavaria… Knight!”

“What about Bavaria?” I asked him, seeing that the centaur was shocked by the sudden changing of the situation. Hearing my question, he again began to speak to me in his broken dialect. This time around, I understood what he was trying to say.

“I didn’t know this was the land of Bavaria! Europe has no intention of claiming this land! I hope you don’t treat our presence wrongly!”

“The land of Bavaria?”

“Yes!” The centaur shouted in a thunderous voice, then quickly spouted more words. He now spoke quickly in some crude semblance of human language, so I again struggled to understand what he was talking about.

If there was one thing that was made very clear, though, it was that he had no will to continue the fight. And this came when the battle-lust within me still raged, and while my Aura Blade was still shimmering and blazing.

I was about to catch fire, but there would be nothing for me to burn. My stomach cramped. I wanted to charge into the Centaur Prince right away.

Even at this moment, the heroic energies that swirled around me urged me into battle. However, I was forced to sheathe Twilight. I couldn't rush at an opponent who showed no hostile intent.

"Damn. I guess this is how the hell it works."

With a heart full of displeasure, I reigned my horse in, making it kick up dust.

* * *

Since then, the Centaur Prince spoke all the time.

His pronunciation was distorted, and it was painful to listen to a being who could not even properly structure sentences. Worse still, he always spoke in a loud, bellowing voice, as if he had swallowed thunder.

If he kept yelling like that, I knew my eardrums would soon burst. Still, despite the crude language and bestial noises, I was able to gain a rough idea of the situation. First of all, his name was Europe, and as I had expected, he was the Prince of the Centaurs — and he was confused.

"So, we followed the direction of the slaughter…!"

"We lost the trail and began wandering around."

Europe told me they moved, trying to figure out the situation somehow, but in the end, they saw only castles and cities strange to them. Europe didn't even know where they were; he didn't know that it was centuries after the Great War.

"Please, speak softer, slower. Anyway, let's sort this out: While you were fighting with warriors that were like wizards and knights, the world suddenly turned upside down, completely disorganizing your minds. When you woke up, you thought we were the enemy, but just when you were about to attack, you saw the light of Bavaria and realized that it was a misunderstanding."

"That's right!" Europe confirmed with a uselessly loud shout. If I engaged in further conversation with him, nothing would remain of my eardrums — but their well-being didn't matter now. I had a brief summary of the situation, going off of the conversations I had with Europe.

First off, it was not difficult to determine the identity of the foe who had attacked the centaurs. They were neither full wizards nor full knights, said Europe, so they must be Ring Knights.

After waking up from my four-hundred years of sleep, I also experienced the Ring Knights like Europe described them now, so his attitude wasn't strange.

The question now was who among the Ring Knights attacked the centaurs, and for what reason?

The centaurs were one of few races, dwarves included, who were not hostile or hateful toward humans. There was no reason to fight with any centaurs that might remain in the world.

Historically, the centaurs never claimed mass swathes of land. They were a tribe who wandered the world like the wind, and they never coveted valuable items.

Besides, it wasn't easy to face them in battle, so there was nothing to gain and much to lose by attacking centaurs.

After thinking about it repeatedly, I found the answer I could deem right.

"Burgundy."

The answer lay in Europe's rambling explanation. The clothing of the knights he described matched the uniform of the Burgundy Empire.

But that only answered the smallest of the questions that now demanded to be answered.

"When he opened his eyes, it was a strange world…"

The most incomprehensible question of them all was the appearance of the centaurs; it was as if they had fallen from the sky.

It was as if time and space were fragmented and then pasted together again.

The centaurs weren't even the first beings I've seen do this.

The fire dragon had returned just as suddenly as the centaurs; even the Overlord had

suddenly appeared in front of me, skipping hundreds of years in the process.

However, no matter how much I worried about it, there was no answer. I decided to take action instead.

“Come with me at once.”

Europe didn’t turn down my offer. Right now, he needed time to adjust to a strange world, so it was natural for me to guide him in a way.

However, despite showing him such favor, he expressed his gratitude to the wrong entity.

“Thank you for your good faith, Bavarian Knight!”

Adelia glanced at me, and I gave her unspoken permission.

“These are not Bavaria’s lands,” she said with a disgusted face as if Europe had committed a great disrespect. At this, Centaur Prince’s eyes widened.

“Welcome to Leonberg, sons and daughters of the storm,” I welcomed them, seeing Europe’s confusion.

“A lot of time has passed.”

I raised my hand before Europe could speak in his thunderous voice again.

“We’ll have to hurry before Count Brandenburg becomes concerned and sends out a search team.”

To be honest, the true reason for my haste was that I didn’t want to wander across this cold, windy plain anymore. I didn’t want to sit here waiting for a search team to find us. But, of course, I had no intention of explaining this to others.

“Arrange yourselves! We set off to the count!”

While the knights hurriedly prepared for departure, the rangers scurried around, picking up their bolts from the snow.

“I’m not sending Vincent. I’m going there,” I muttered to myself as I looked at the

hustle and bustle. And if things had worked out a little differently, I could've been wielding my sword right now. As I continued muttering, I saw Carls shake his head.

I'm not sure why, but I rode to Brandenburg's castle with slumped shoulders.

After two day's marching, we reached the castle. I entered it, accompanied only by Europe and some centaurs.

"Your Highness. What the hell is all this about? Are these-"

Count Brandenburg glanced at the centaurs who had entered the castle with me.

I had sent a ranger ahead of us to explain the general situation, but the count seemed to want to hear a detailed explanation directly from me.

"Someone else will explain it. I need to rest."

Having already lost all motivation for explanations, I left the job of delivering reports to others and headed straight to my lodgings.

I closed the door and went straight to bed. An unknown sense of incongruity ran through my body. I opened my eyes and quickly glanced around the royal suite that the count had specially prepared for me. My eyes suddenly found a corner of the room steeped in unnaturally deep darkness. I drew Twilight.

"Come out."

There was no answer.

"If you don't come out, I'll have to drag you out." With this, I pointed my sword at the darkness.

At that very moment, the darkness shimmered, and a pale face popped from it.

CHAPTER 248
THE PRINCE'S VIRTUE (4)

Even when the sun had not yet set outside, the woman's face was highly evident, as if the pale moonlight was shining directly onto her. Near-absolute darkness surrounded her body. Her sudden appearance was grotesque in a way, and I frowned.

"You could have greeted me in the normal manner," I complained as I pointed my sword at Ophelia, and she replied as if it didn't matter.

"I was being inconsiderate in my own way. Were you surprised?"

I laughed at her, knowing she made herself appear alive exactly not to surprise people. "At least you admit it."

I would've been better had she been in her true form.

Confronting a pale-faced woman suddenly popping out at you from the darkness was far less beneficial for the heart than facing a living skeleton.

"How long have you been waiting here for me?"

"Since I heard you were coming to the count's castle," Ophelia answered in an almost nagging tone as if wondering why I had come so late.

"You have really surprised me."

I had been looking at the world outside the window, worrying, and then turned to suddenly confront Ophelia's non-skeletal form.

"My heart almost stopped."

"You say this is better?" She asked, as if engaging in casual conversation, and this made me frown. Afterward, I saw Ophelia's hand and stiffened in shock.

“You…”

In the past, Ophelia had sacrificed two of her fingers in exchange for a glimpse of the truth that was barred from me.

But now, her hand missed another finger. It was a clean cut, only leaving the knucklebone.

“I once more paid for a truth beyond my reach, but it’s not such a large price. So, you don’t have to look so sad.”

As I listened to Ophelia, it was almost as if she didn’t know how important fingers were to a mage.

I was not ignorant of the mage’s art. Complex and profound magic circles are difficult to complete using even all ten fingers — Ophelia now had to form them using seven. I wasn’t sure, but I guessed that her magic would never be the same. It was as if Ophelia had looked into my heart when she said, “Unlike before when I had lost much, the loss was worth the reward.”

Even though I knew how vague her words were, I hoped that they would prove true this time.

I wondered if Ophelia having to leave the northern dungeon and travel all the way here to the far central region had anything to do with her missing finger.

I waited patiently for her to lay the facts before me.

“The boundaries between the past and the present are broken,” Ophelia whispered before long. “The past has lost constancy. It has lost all stability.”

As I listened to Ophelia’s resoundingly gloomy words, the muscles in my neck tightened.

“…that has distorted the future and created a myriad of possibilities.”

Her chin continued to rattle as she spoke of the changes taking place in the world.

“Some will be beneficial to humans, but some will harm them. Auspicious and evil things both will occur everywhere.”

I believed it, for I recalled the return of the fire dragon and the Plague Lord and its tribe. The reason I came here was to remedy the terror that had gripped Brandenburg County.

Ophelia was saying that something like this would happen all over the world.

I shared her concern, though I knew all the results of this changed world would not be disastrous. The present situation was a fine example of this: while tracking corrupt beings butchering villages, we instead met a mythical tribe that could become a good cavalry force.

Of course, I certainly didn't know Europe and the centaurs' opinion on this. Even as I thought for a time, Ophelia continued talking.

She mostly spoke of the confusion that would arise with the appearance of beings from the past. Ophelia said that despite some beneficial things that might occur, the entire event was still a disaster.

"The boundary between the past and present is sundered. The shackles that have held the old beings are broken."

Ophelia's dire warning had now been given. There are many catastrophes that can occur, and the current one was the most terrible. In the past, when the Great War ended, many kinds of kings and nobles inscribed their names upon the declaration to end it. Some went into the forest, others underground; some, into the deep darkness.

And so the victors of the war exiled them to all corners of the world.

Was it that all of these things could now be unleashed upon the world at once? I thought of Sigrun and the other evil, cunning elves. I was not sure how many Elder High Elves still existed — perhaps Sigrun was the only one.

That in itself was a disaster enough.

Fortunately, not all of the shackles holding the faeries have been broken. It rare for anyone in this world to know how the Great War ended. Many passed on the stories of how all non-human races were exiled in the proclamation, though some did not. One of those who remembered is me. I was a direct observer of the declaration and a signer of the pledge.

The promises of that day will never be completely forgotten, and the proclamation will never cease to function completely while I am alive. Or at least, as long as I remember the declaration and the oaths undergone by the various species.

I was there as an observer that day, and I wondered how many fellow notaries and observers still lived and remembered. Probably not many; perhaps I was the only one.

Whatever the case, it was clear that the declaration's coercive power would not be what it used to be. It was a pity, but there wasn't much I could do in the current situation.

All I could truly do was send the aberrations back and see to the oath's enactment with my own eyes. Even that would not work long in this changed world.

I clenched my teeth. I knew I had to develop more strength for when the day I await comes. If the king and the others knew, they would surely jump in front of me. Still, now was not the time for me to be back in the royal palace killing time.

I then quickly devised a plan in my head.

I had to find a way for me and my knights to be permitted more in order to soothe the chaos in the kingdom. While I was immersed in my thoughts, my face relaxed.

"Once again, not everything will work against humans," said Ophelia in a tone more wistful than before. "One thing that will benefit humans has already arrived in the world. It has blossomed without anyone knowing, and now we are sowing its seeds into the world."

Ophelia said this as if it should be comforting, and she gazed into my eyes.

"It is as if dawn rises while everyone is asleep and not realizing it."

Ophelia acted as if I had made some sort of funny joke. Rather than having fun, I was sick of it. I knew how attractive Ophelia had been in the past, but to me, she was now just a bloody skeleton rattling its jawbones.

She didn't look well.

"Hmm."

I became very curious about something Ophelia had told me, but I didn't ask.

If she could have told me, she would have done so. If she hadn't told me, it meant telling me the truth would cost her a lot. I was locked in my thoughts and suddenly came up with something she could confirm for me.

"Ophelia."

She smiled as she looked at me.

"Was I a human before I was a sword?"

She looked at me with regretful eyes; her mouth stretched in a rictus of pity. Perhaps, she had already looked into my past with the power of [Shinan].

I believed that Ophelia had the answer I was looking for.

"If only beings of blood and flesh can be considered as persons, then you were a human in the past."

This was as I had already guessed; there was no big shock. Still, it only amplified my curiosity. If what I had seen in the memory was my past life, why was I alone on a snowfield, dying a lonely death? What kind of existence did I have that I had to take my own life?

What kind of being I was when I was human?

As I started pouring out questions, Ophelia stared at me in silence.

"Does anything really change?" she soon asked me in a soft tone. "Although your body might always have been of cold iron, with not a drop of blood coursing through it… I at least know you have always been human."

My eyes stretched wide as I heard Ophelia's unexpected words. The High Lich didn't avoid my gaze, and while it looked only cold, it felt so very warm.

Her eyes spoke to me: 'Your body is just a shell. You are more human than anyone else.'

"If it was Arwen that told me to live like a human, as that is her habit, I would never

have agreed with words," I replied jokingly, somehow feeling embarrassed.

"I don't think she would have said it in that sense," Ophelia replied as her chin rattled.

"Even so, if you ask me about your past, there is only one thing I can tell you." Ophelia unwaveringly stared at me.

"You were a knight greater and nobler than any in your age."

Ophelia still looked at me, and the memories I had of her became interposed over her skeletal form as if I was looking at her with closed eyes.

The woman looking at me had eyes filled with compassion and sympathy, with a sorrowful face, as if there was some inner weakness she could not bear.

Ophelia was no longer a damned skeleton to me.

"Right," I said, turning my head away from the same face that Ophelia had worn when she was alive. It was awkward and uncomfortable.

"Is your purpose in coming here only to warn me?" I changed the topic, and Ophelia began laughing again. This time, her smile was mean, as if she was looking at a naughty boy.

"I came to inform you of another matter."

"What is it?"

"I have also been freed from the shackles of my past."

Ophelia continued to speak in a refreshing tone of voice. The High Lich had escaped death and gained an eternal existence, but she then became a prisoner chained under the foot of a vast mountain range. She has now regained complete freedom.

"Was there ever any restrictions on you?"

I was really surprised by that.

"I thought you were stuck in the dungeon just conducting magical research," I hastily

explained as Ophelia looked at me with a somewhat dull face. Ophelia had been concerned with nothing but magic in her human lifetime, so I had assumed that the same counted after she had become High Lich.

Ophelia told me that she had been forced against her will to participate in an expedition four hundred years ago. There, she faced dark terrors. Since then, she hadn't clung so much to her favorite fields of magical research, and she was content with her existence. Ophelia believed that sacrifice and dedication had been done enough in her past life.

A small smile spread over Ophelia's lips as she looked at me with a curious face.

"You are so consistent. In the past, and even now."

I did not understand what she was saying.

"That's why I cannot let you go. I always try to be harsh and strong by myself. I cannot be weak inside."

"That's the first time I've heard anyone say that." I laughed. It would have been worth it to see the facial expressions of Montpellier and viperous-eyed gnomes like him if they had heard Ophelia's words.

But, unfortunately, they weren't here right now. Only Ophelia was with me, and she was about to leave.

"I will see you again soon."

Ophelia started to melt into the dark, her figure becoming hazy. It was only then that I realized the complexity of our illusory conversation. The feeling of sitting atop the far-off White Night Tower had felt so clear to me.

"At least she won."

I paid moderate homage to Ophelia's achievements over the past four hundred years.

* * *

Deep in the dark dungeon, the High Lich opened her eyes.

“The Knight of Dawn who drove out the abyssal night.”

“A great hero who was betrayed and abandoned.”

“The last remaining witness who remembers the oath.”

“The scales facing chaos will soon rise.”

Fragmented phrases began flowing from the lich’s slender chin.

“The poor and pitiful soul left on the border between past and present.”

Her shattered words soon became deep sighs.

“May all the grandest of glories you have accomplished in your past life return to you.”

“Let life no longer seem a sad and painful dream to you.”

The deep sighs became longing sighs.

“Poor Gruhorn, who forgot himself.”

“The first knight.”

And when Ophelia’s earnest desire finally reached the ancient, long-forgotten name-

‘Kur-r-r-r!’

At that moment, the world trembled.

CHAPTER 249
THE PRINCE'S VIRTUE (5)

Hansen hurried up with his steps. Winter was coming; the sun had set far earlier. He had been wandering, camping on the plains. That was by no means what Hansen wanted to do now. At first, the atmosphere wasn't too bad. It was still a short while ago that he had heard that some villages in the central region had been turned into ruins overnight.

According to the rumors Hansen heard, it was doubtful whether these massacres were perpetrated by anything human. "Eh, let's not think about it too much."

Just remembering the rumors made chills run down Hansen's spine.

It seemed as if some horror would pop up from any one of the boulder piles around him.

Hansen tried to comfort himself. The eastern part of the kingdom was far from the western lands. However, Hansen couldn't get rid of the horrible thoughts that filled his mind. He tightened his body and hurried his steps. The darker it became, the swifter was his pace.

And what was his reward for such diligence?

"It's a village!"

Hansen cheered as he saw the lights in the distance. His body, which now felt exhausted from walking all day, was rejuvenated by a newfound vitality. He headed for the lights, almost at a run.

"Stop!"

The village elders greeted him with crude, wooden spears at the entrance of their homestead. Hansen, showing no signs of embarrassment, slowed his pace and showed his good intentions.

“I am not a suspicious person, but a merchant who wanders the world and sells his wares.”

The women who saw the trinkets and curious items hanging from Hansen’s backpack immediately began to covet them. However, the elders were still pointing their spears at the stranger with caution-filled faces.

Hansen sighed. It wasn’t the first time he experienced it, and he knew exactly what to do in this case.

“The emperor is a motherfucker. Burgundy is rotting shit.”

After cursing, Hansen moved aside a spear an old man was pointing at him.

“I’m not an imperial.”

“Yeah, that’s right. These empire blokes will rather die than curse the emperor.”

Hansen gave an internal laugh of relief.

Considering the fact that Leonberg had suffered a great deal from imperial spies, the elders’ actions were surely understandable. However, apart from granting him his current safety, Hansen wondered if he would have gotten away with such a childish masterpiece were he a real spy.

Of course, there was more than one way in which the villagers rooted out spies.

“As you can see, I am a native of the kingdom.”

Hansen bared his heart as he spoke with the elders in a good-natured manner.

“You are a lucky young man! I don’t know how different our village’s people are, but I know there are some who shoot any man coming from that direction. All the young men in our village have, of course, run off to go fight the Empire’s blokes.”

“We would have gone too, if only they had received us. However, they didn’t accept me because of my age.”

“Hah, you can always correct that error,” Hansen mused, and the elders all burst out laughing.

“Don’t say that. How old are you? By the way, I think times like these are good for a businessman like yourself.”

“I am still young,” said Hansen. “And when you’re young, you would not yet know what terror is.”

“We’re jumping awake at night here. Even the young ones are too scared to sleep.”

While the old folk chatted politely away, a woman approached Hansen.

“If you want a place to rest, there is a place to stay in town.

“Would you like a meal? Perhaps some warm wine? Our village gets half the water than others, so our stores are quite few.”

Hansen saw that the woman glanced at his backpack, showing a keen interest in its contents. He then followed her and headed right into the village.

He didn’t know how a woman in such a remote place could offer such luxurious meals, and she was yet to lay it before him. Perhaps, Hansen thought, she would give him a bowl of rice and force him to pay for the extras.

However, before Hansen had even started unpacking the contents of his backpack, before his warm wine, something happened.

‘Dang Dang Dang!’

The loud ringing of a bell echoed through the settlement, and the quiet rural village quickly became noisy. The women who had been sitting in the room with him jumped up and headed outside. Hansen followed them as if possessed by the sudden chaotic atmosphere.

Hansen decided he should rather not have followed them. If he hadn’t, he would not have seen a scene so fierce that it burned itself into his dreams. Signal fires were blazing everywhere, and a strange, reddish light was cast upon the village fence.

“What, a wolf?”

“Not a wolf! There was one day when all the wolf activity dried up in this neighborhood! And when has there ever in this world been a wolf that shines so

brightly!" one of the old men shouted.

"Then what is that!" Hansen pointed his finger at the fence.

An eerie red light was everywhere, and at a rough estimate, Hansen reckoned there were at least a hundred enemies.

"I'm damned if I know!" the old man shouted. "But I'm sure we'll find out soon."

The elder beckoned at a group of women who had gathered in one place.

"Start the fire! If we're lucky, they'll see it in other towns!"

The women gave small nods and started lighting the great bonfire in the middle of the village.

'Hwarruk!'

In an instant, flames flooded over the firewood. The flames were so fierce that Hansen wondered whether they would spread, but that didn't matter right now. What mattered was the unknown beings surrounding the village.

Only an idiot would fail to see that these things haven't visited the village with a good purpose in mind. The only feelings contained in the eerie light were murder and hostility. And Hansen was sure the owners of those bloody eyes would attack them long before the fire incinerated the village.

"Do everything that you've practiced!"

"We would have done this against the imperials in any case!"

Villagers threw carts over the entrances and against the walls of the village and lit them on fire. In an instant, the settlement was aflame.

"Don't be scared, everyone!"

"Whatever they are, if they get stabbed by a spear, they will bleed and die!"

The elders encouraged their people in loud voices.

Women encouraged one another with sharp voices as they glared at the fence, clutching spears and pieces of iron.

Hansen stared at it all blankly.

Wherever he looked, he failed to see one young man. It seemed that all the soldiers had marched off to fight the Empire, and this was what they left behind. Hansen looked over the fence again and soon realized that whatever this was, the weak elders would not be able to stop it. A village in the central region would soon be wiped out.

“The damned royal family,” Hansen cursed softly. This was all because of them. What was their cause for war? Independence or whatever, and now the lives of these elders and the joy they could have experienced in the remainder of their lives would be taken from them.

Had it not been for the royal family’s useless war, this village would not have been left without young men for so long. Some say that the queen died trying to protect the citizens of the capital, but Hansen did not believe this. There was no way that a queen would give her life for the lowly commoners. It was evident that she died while trying to escape and that they are now trying to glorify her death.

And even if the rumors of her deed were true, nothing was great about it. It was fair that the royal family also suffered death along with the peasants who are shoveling dung for them.

Hansen had always looked at those innocents who died in war as pitiful figures — the problem was, he was about to become one of them.

“You have to flee! Even if you pretend not to see, they outnumber you more than two to one. What are old men and women going to do against that?”

One woman shook her head at Hansen’s words.

“I have children. One is barely able to walk yet, and the other has barely been weaned. How long do you think they’ll last if I run away with them now?”

The elders affirmed the woman’s choice.

“The plains surround us, I don’t know what this is, but I don’t think they’re slower

than humans."

"You think fleeing is a breeze? You want me to run away from the village where I have lived my entire life?"

Hansen started to step away. He was an outsider; there was no reason for him to die here. He had to flee right away through the first gap he saw.

'Sksh' While Hansen retreated, he made eye contact with several villagers. None of them seemed to blame him; they merely pretended not to see his flight.

"It is hard for you. I wish you hadn't come to our village at such a bad time."

"If you have spare time later, please bury our bodies. We do not want an outsider to be murdered in our village. Your dreams are fierce."

Some of the old men openly told Hansen that he was not responsible for the current misfortune.

"Why fight? You will all die here today."

"What else can we do?! We're all old, and there are mothers and babies that should live!"

Hansen clenched his teeth. It wasn't without guilt that he thought he had to leave right away. He definitely thought so.

"Fuck it!"

When Hansen came to his senses, he found himself clutching a crude wooden spear along with the villagers.

"Why didn't you go?" one of them asked him.

"Don't say any more about it. I don't understand it either."

"This'll be different from our old battles?" one old man asked.

"I'm reassured because we've been having one long success run," another elder laughed, touching Hansen's shoulder. "Let's hold on a little," he urged Hansen, "Since

the beacon is lit, the lord's soldiers will come running. If we hold on until then-"

"Oh, stop lying about the world! Why do you wait for the lord's soldiers to come? Is it because you don't know what these nobles are like? No matter how many people like us die, they will never open their eyes! The soldiers will come? We will all be dead and scorched when they arrive!"

Hansen started screaming wildly, no longer able to contain the emotions he had suppressed within himself. The women and elders remained stubborn and ready to fight; some muttered that if the sturdy Hansen escaped, he could at least go follow his fierce dreams.

Hansel somehow forced courage into his heart.

'The damned royal family. Damn nobles,' he cursed within his mind. If it wasn't for the war, this village would not have been defenseless. If there had been a good defense here, Hansel wouldn't have had to grip a spear within a rank of villagers.

As he continued to swear at the royal family, Hansel's fear subsided a bit.

"Even if I die, I shall do so unconditionally!" Hansel screamed with rat-tailed courage.

"Ahhhh!"

However, the semblance of courage Hansel had mustered disappeared without a trace as he heard the things outside cry out.

'Quzzak!'

Even before the roar died down, the rough barriers the villagers had erected still ended up getting smashed apart. Flaming pieces of wood flew through the air, and sparks scattered in all directions. Through the storm of flames, the owners of those eerie red eyes appeared. They had distorted, long-snouted mouths and bizarre bodies covered with brittle hair; somehow, neither humans nor beasts.

They were about a yard long and three feet high.

'Graaarr' a dog-headed monster, growled as it revealed yellow teeth. Hansen froze where he stood, so vicious was the sight.

“I’m going to die anyway, so why wait?”

“I will put the younger lives before mine!”

The old men bellowed their battle cries as they stepped forward. Hansen felt uncomfortable when he saw their skinny bodies.

‘Kreuk!”

The dog-headed monsters grinned wide and yelped at the old men.

“These guys! None shall pass until I die!” one of the old men roared his oath as he pointed his spear at the foe.

At that very moment, the monsters rushed in. Hansen struggled to grasp what happened next properly.

When he snapped awake, all the elders who had stood in the front rank had been decapitated.

‘Tuk, Degur!’

One of the old men’s head rolled across the ground, eyes wide open.

‘Quazchschplt,’ a monster stepped onto the head, stomped down, and burst it into a pulp.

Hansen was captivated by the scene. He knew he should already have run away, yet he was immersed, deep in thought, as he matched the gazes of the red-eyed monsters, watching as they bit into the elders’ bodies.

For a very short time, Hansen wanted the monsters to become full on the corpses. It was a very fleeting notion.

‘Hagghm,’ the monsters spat out the corpses they had been chewing on, almost at once. Hansen vaguely pondered this change in their behavior. It was clear that the old men’s tough, leathery bodies did not suit the monsters’ tastes. Certainly, their taste for flesh surely felt greater for a plump-skinned woman rather than the tough bodies of the elders.

And as Hansen thought about it, an absurd notion came into his head. Even while he was overwhelmed by fear, something still happened in his mind. If this didn't happen, Hansen would have already thrown his spear aside and run away."

"More! Come on, you dog-headed bastards!"

If Hansen hadn't shouted like a madman, the monsters would not have paid much attention to him. He immediately regretted it after shouting. Why was it necessary for him to step forward and draw the monsters' attention?

Yet, contrary to such thoughts, Hansen's mouth still moved.

"If you're a dog, I'll throw you some bones and feed you like a dog! Come on, then!"

Hansen wanted to stop yet could only keep shouting.

"Come on! I'll beat you like a dog!"

At that moment, all the monsters grew quiet.

"Ah, you understand people!"

Hans was sick and tired of those glares which challenged him.

"Oh, you're very smart, aren't you?!"

Without even knowing what he was shouting, Hansen kept at it.

"Yes, you better stop talking!"

Would the women standing behind me be able to hold these things off, Hansen thought?

There was no time to find out. One of the monsters stepped forward as it yelped excitedly. It was the smallest of its kind, yet its head was still twice as large as Hansen's. The monster gave a low growl and approached Hansen without hesitation.

"Oh, ah, ah!" Hansen closed his eyes and thrust forward with his spear.

'Quzzik!' There was a discomfiting noise. Hansen carefully opened his eyes.

His gaze ran along his bloody spear, up to where its tip touched the monster's tough-haired chest. Hansen looked at the spear tip for a bit and then gently raised his head.

Hansen saw the monster's fierce visage, but something was strange- The monster had bloodshot eyes that bulged from their sockets, and it yelped from its snout, so great was the pain. Then its eyes turned a milky white. Blood splattered from the monster's mouth. Hansen, after looking at the unfolding scene blankly, hurriedly turned to one of the village women. "Look! Have you seen it? I killed a monster, a monster!"

Hansen talked so much that he forgot about the dire situation and was suddenly filled with a strange sense of danger. The woman's gaze was focused behind Hansen, not on him.

"Well, no way-" not sure whether the monster was dead, Hansen forced his neck to creak back. Suddenly- the monster gave its chest a few shakes, crouched low, and attacked Hansen.

"Oaah! Ah!" Hansen screamed as the thing then charged into him.

"Save me!" he pleaded, closing his eyes. Hansen lay like that for a while and suddenly opened his eyes when he was sure he didn't feel the expected pain.

"Huh?" he grunted. A silver-armored knight was looking down at him, with a hanging, bloodied sword. The knight reached out, and Hansen hastily grabbed onto the hand.

'Chuck!'

With the knight pulling Hansen, he easily lifted himself up. He shoved the heavy body of the monster that lay on him away with little effort.

Only then did Hansen see the deep wound that ran across the monster's back. The sword had sliced so deep that bones were revealed. Hansen looked at the knight, who was looking at the elders' corpses scattered through the village.

"If I had come earlier, I would have prevented their deaths," the knight said in a clear voice that stayed solid despite the horror and then looked at Hansen and the village women again.

‘Cheolkup,’ the knight raised the visor of her helm, and Hansen was fascinated. The woman’s appearance revealed from beneath her helmet was surely the culmination of all beauty; Hansen had never heard of its like.

“You have done well!” Hansen suddenly praised the villagers with a bold face, as if he didn’t care that he had almost died.

“From now on, let us rest assured!”

CHAPTER 250
THE PRINCE'S VIRTUE (6)

Before the knight was done speaking, screams burst out from all directions. Thick, laden screams; clearly non-human. Monstrous heads and limbs scattered into the air as they were severed.

'Cheol-cheol-cheol-eok!'

The sounds of heavy metal tearing through flesh came from all over.

"Don't miss a single one!"

"Leave the gnolls' disposal to the knights. Soldiers, protect the villagers!"

As an eloquent voice mouthed orders, heavily-armored soldiers and knights appeared, cutting through the monsters like straw. And so, the slaughter began, and this time the monsters were on the receiving end. Hansen looked at it with a stupid face.

"Hah, are they really here?" a villager cheered as the soldiers approached. "And it's not just them, but also knights in iron armor."

The nobles and knights Hansen knew didn't care about what went on in such secluded villages.

"When I first encountered a monster, I reeled from its stench, and my body hardened, so much that I wouldn't have felt it if one of my limbs had been ripped off."

A clear, polite voice entered Hansen's empty mind.

"It is a great thing for a man that hasn't even trained against such monsters to stab a spear into one of them. You can be proud of today's work."

Hansen turned his head to find the owner of the voice.

“Ah…”

However, at this point, the speaker had already disappeared. As Hansen looked around, he was filled with excitement as he saw the monsters being cut down by a sword of starlight.

“I know — it’s such an honor!” A man spoke to Hansen while he intently watched the battle. “The knight you’ve just met is a direct knight of his Highness the Crown Prince. And she’s not only a knight but his Highness’s dearest knight and one of the kingdom’s eight champions.”

The man was wearing leather armor, distinguishing him from the other soldiers.

“A champion…” Hansen muttered as he dully glanced at the soldier.

“What is her name?” he suddenly asked with shining eyes.

“She is Sir Arwen of Kirgayen County. Soldiers like us just call her the Knight of Steel.

“Steel Knight…”

Hansen had thought she looked like a knight of steel while watching her battle.

“What can I do to become a soldier?” he asked the man.

“They don’t recruit soldiers individually. But that doesn’t mean there’s no way to get it done.”

“Tell me how. I will do it.”

The soldier gave a cynical laugh as he turned his head. Hansen was unable to see his face.

“Go to Balahard in the north. Apply as a ranger there.”

If Hansen had seen the man’s face, he might have acted differently.

“If I do that, will they accept me?”

“Ah, be sure to say this once you reach the recruitment hall.”

“What?”

“I came to kick Jordan’s ass.”

“Who’s that?” asked Hansen.

“I don’t know. But if you say that, you’ll get the job. After that, it’s up to you.”

Hansen had experienced many strange incidents on that day and was more excited than usual. And so, he made a decision that he would come to regret all his life.

“Thank you,” Hansen said. “I know it’s no big deal, but here’s something for it.”

Hansen gave the soldier a few valuable items from his backpack.

* * *

“Two hundred and thirty-three. We took care of them to a beast.”

Hearing the knight’s report, Arwen Kirgayen urged him in a firm voice to once again make sure that no monster still breathed. The Balahard Rangers were already spread all over the battlefield, sticking their shortswords into the bodies of fallen monsters.

“As soon as our cleanup is over, we will leave,” said Arwen.

“Is that the right thing to do?”

“By coming here, we have affirmed his Highness’s statement that this would happen throughout the kingdom. If we tarry, many more will die. There is no time for delay.”

The knight nodded and suddenly mouthed his thoughts out loud.

“It’s just amazing how his Highness knew this would happen.”

“He is a man of innumerable depths. I trust him with all my heart, so I merely believe and follow,” Arwen said with a proud face. It lasted only for a while, for the signs of sorrow soon came upon her.

“If it was not for His Highness, how many people would have died? There are already so many deaths I could not prevent. How much would these people have suffered if

we had not come?"

Arwen looked at the corpses of the elders, yet to be carried away.

She mourned for those who have died meaningless deaths for a long time until the knights announced that the battlefield had been cleared.

"Thank you! Thank you very much!"

Women who had escaped the tragedy expressed their gratitude toward Arwen in firm voices, despite their sorrow.

"There is no reason to be grateful toward me. I was merely following the orders of his Highness the Crown Prince."

Arwen gave all credit to the royal family without the slightest show of contempt and decided the time for departure had come.

"Troops! Move along!"

"Troops, start marching!" Another knight shouted, and the soldiers of the extermination squad began moving again. As they continued the operation, they turned their horses' heads whenever they found someone in need of aid. When they found monsters, they slaughtered them all — and all credit was given to the Crown Prince.

Similar scenes played out all over the kingdom.

The extermination squads led by champions roved around killing the monsters early in their rampages. Thanks to this, the panic that could have spread across Leonberg was quickly suppressed.

It was now natural for the people to raise their voices in praise of the royal family, who had noticed signs none knew off, even dispatching champions and other knights to ensure the people's safety.

The heart of Lionel Leonberger, head of the royal family, was troubled, however. Of course, as monarch, he was glad that the people were safe and that more of them praised the Leonbergers.

“I’ve been told that the uproar in Brandenburg County has subsided, so why does he still not come back?”

The problem was that Lionel’s eldest son did not know how to return whenever he left.

“Well, it is said that his Highness has made the central fortress his stronghold.”

The king jumped up as he heard Bielefeld’s words.

“A base!”

“He commands the extermination operation unfolding across the kingdom from there.”

The marquis watched the king’s eyes, knowing that the prince’s advice and orders to the champions had been so timely that countless tragedies had been averted.

The king laughed.

When he had instructed his son to gain the trust of the people and cultivate the virtues vital to a Crown Prince, Ian’s best solution was no different from how he operated on the battlefield. Even while the king wanted to bring his son in and scold him at once, he had no justification for doing so.

As the marquis had mentioned, the reports from champions and lords praising the Crown Prince’s judgment were beginning to pile up.

“It’s all my fault. Since I was young, my heart could not be attached to the palace and its walls. So at his age, I was always going outside. Who am I to blame him now?”

The king sighed as he thought of his eldest son and his wandering ways. Then, one day, a messenger from the Crown Prince came before the king.

“His Highness has sent a letter to your Majesty.”

The man handed the king a carefully sealed letter. The king opened the seal without hesitation and checked the contents.

After scanning over the letter, the king burst into laughter.

“What? Did his Highness send a letter?”

After hearing the news, the Marquis of Bielefeld came to discover the contents of the message. The king silently handed the letter to the old man.

After reading it, the marquis also started laughing.

“Unlike usual, he added a bunch of unnecessary paragraphs, but I understand that he means he will only return after all the work is done. Did I get it wrong?”

“I interpreted it the same as your Majesty.”

The king sighed as he heard the marquis’ answer. Bielefeld, seeing the king in such a sorry state, carefully offered words of consolation.

“But, as is written in the letter, his Highness says he will refrain from entering battle as much as possible. It’s truly fortunate that our greatest worry is therefore relieved.”

“Do you believe my son’s words, marquis?”

The marquis avoided the king’s question.

It might be true that Crown Prince was quietly brooding in his fortress, but Bielefeld knew that the prince could grab his sword and run off to the battlefield at any time. The marquis knew this fact, the king knew it, and so did many others.

“But in some way, it cannot be said that his Highness the Crown Prince has violated your Majesty’s order.”

The marquis hesitated for a while and then decided he would not give up on his quest of comforting the king.

“People’s fears are settled quickly by swiftly removing the vile things that make them tremble in terror. And in the process of doing so, the voices of people praising his Highness’s virtue are heard all over the kingdom. Is this not what your Majesty wanted?”

The king couldn’t answer — the marquis was right.

Although the prince hadn’t taken care of the people’s pain face-to-face, it was clear

that he was ensuring the stability of the populace by removing the source of the threat. It was not wrong to say that he proved himself possessing those virtues required by a Crown Prince. Of course, the method was greatly different from what the king had wanted. In any case, thanks to the Crown Prince, the turmoil within the kingdom quickly subsided.

However, not all countries upon the continent could settle the chaos as swiftly as the Leonberg Kingdom. Rather, the situation was getting worse in most countries as they failed to stem the confusion.

It was so in the Empire.

Hwaryong beset its southern territory, there were rebellions in the east and northeast, and imperial forces have been repeatedly defeated in the Dotrin Kingdom's onslaught. As the situation was so chaotic, the Empire was unable to properly respond to the strange beings that moved in from all directions.

All over the Empire, lords screamed and cried out for salvation. The third princeps, having conscripted troops from various places to gain the upper hand in the war against his brother, could not ignore their requests for aid.

Of course, the terrifyingly selfish and self-informed third princeps did not heed their pleas from the beginning.

"Your Highness, listen to their requests."

"Why must I?"

The third princeps blamed the lords for not properly cracking down upon the troubles in their own territories. He didn't consider that he was leading their elite troops and that they were truly struggling.

"We must inform his Majesty the Emperor and order all elites directly under the imperial family to smother the embers of chaos that have flared up everywhere."

"If it was really the case, I would know about it. Must I now go teach these lightweight lords how to wage war?"

The princeps' entourage consistently tried to persuade him.

“Think differently. If those territories fall, then the lands ruled after your Highness’s ascension may be reduced.”

“There must be some troops we can spare. It is the only way.”

“Even if they overcome the troubles, it is clear that they will be hit hard. This could result in fewer taxes and tributes that the imperial family will collect in the future.”

The greedy third princeps now began listening seriously to his aides. And so, after his closest allies spoke to him for a long time, the third princeps gave the answer everyone wanted to hear.

“Good. I will personally look into their difficulties. I will visit his Majesty. Once his Majesty permits me to take the troops serving directly under the imperial family, I will have the secret weapon to remedy the Empire’s chaos,” the third princeps grandiosely announced.

However, when the day came for him to meet the emperor, he started fretting, devising ways to prevent the meeting. The third princeps had become reluctant to stand alone with the emperor lately. In fact, it was with eyes shaking with fear that the third prince entered the emperor’s residence.

It had always been like this, but the feeling seems to have gotten worse. The princeps didn’t know when it had started. One day he just realized that his father was looking at him with gruesomely cold eyes.

At first, the princeps thought it was because the emperor was against the peace treaty and the fact that imperial land and fortresses had been handed to the Leonberg Kingdom. But over time, the princeps realized that it wasn’t that.

The emperor’s cold gaze was like that of a snake looking at a plump frog.

“No way… did his Majesty do something taboo, as my traitor brothers says he did?”

When the third princeps thought about the emperor’s withering gaze, he figured that his brother might not just be spewing empty words.

“I’m the only successor to the throne, anyway. What am I afraid of?”

The third princeps tried to thoroughly steady himself with the consolation that we as

the only immediate imperial heir. While taking courage from that thought, the third princeps went to stand before the emperor and inform him of the Empire's situation as his aides had related it to him.

"Not possible."

The emperor did not even comment on the report, instead steadfastly refusing the princeps' request. The Empire's situation was so bad that even the third princeps, who did not care about the troubles of lesser lords, listened to the explanations of his close associates and realized its seriousness.

All the repeated failed invasions, the revolts, and the rampaging of the dragon — these were not light issues, and all of them were crises. However, as always, the emperor sat looking down upon the world and acted as if there was no crisis.

The third princeps suddenly frowned. As he thought about it, he realized that a casual handshake from the emperor had caused all the failures. It was he who had ordered the failed invasions of Dotrin, who had ordered the army to forcibly expand its frontline and attack the Leonberg Kingdom.

No ruler would intentionally cause his empire's decline, so maybe the emperor wasn't as great as everyone thought. The third princeps became inspired by all the rosy predictions his aides had brainwashed into him over the past several days.

And so, for the first time, he felt an emotion other than fear while facing the emperor. It was the recognition of imperfection; it was ambition.

The third princeps smirked and raised his head, making eye contact with the emperor.

The moment he looked into the emperor's eyes, the peculiar ambition that had flared up in his heart withered into nothingness.

The princeps could only tremble. The emperor stared at him and waved his hand, and he couldn't even give a greeting as he fled from the hall. The emperor sat on his throne for a long time as he stared at the spot where the princeps had stood. Then, he spoke.

"The great Burgundy blood has also become tame in the face of a thousand years."

It was a strange thing to say about one's own flesh and blood. It was said in a dry tone lacking any feeling or sign of regret as if the speaker was evaluating those not related to him. The emperor's face suddenly twisted. Unlike before, it was now filled with emotions.

"Oaaf," the emperor groaned like a beast and raised his hand. An ugly, throbbing vein popped up on his discolored blue hand as he struggled to raise it toward his head. His other hand's nails scratched over the golden throne. If it had not been of gold, the Burgundy imperial family's historic throne would've been marred by scratches.

The emperor continued to scratch his fingers into the throne for a long time. When he stopped, he raised his hand and looked at his fingertips. Blood poured out, yet the trembling fingers were slowly regaining their usual appearance. The only different thing was the broken mess of his fingernails.

"Tcha. If you put up with it a little, it will soon go away."

The emperor then got up from his seat as if nothing had happened.

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